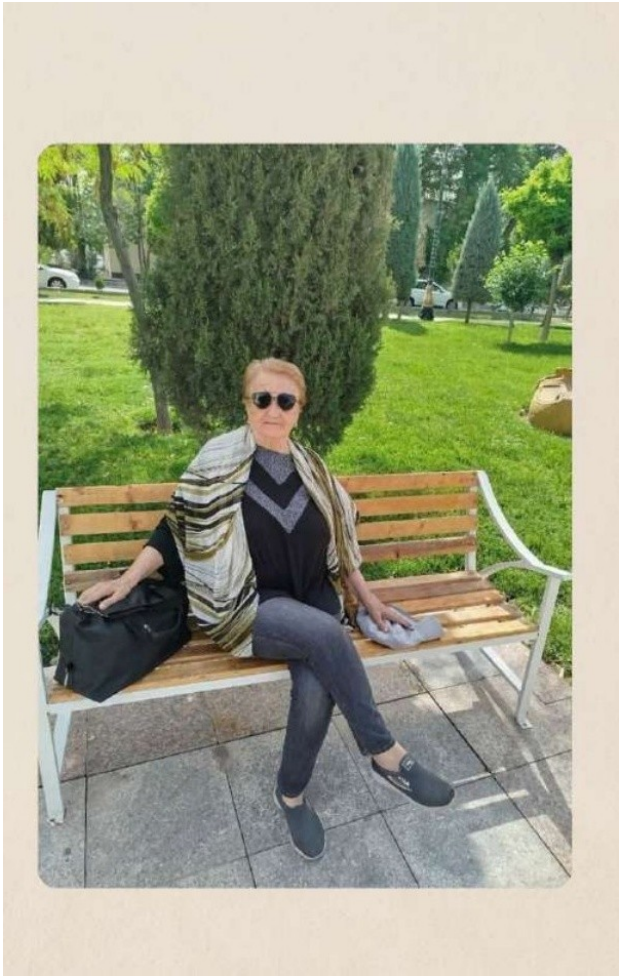
SAPARGUL ADAEVA

THE IRON FLOWER
OR A VASE FILLED WITH TEARS

English Translation

THE AUTHOR



Sapargul Adaeva

Sapargul Ataevna Adaeva

The Iron Flower, or a Vase Filled with Tears

Translated from Russian

(This page is intentionally blank.)

The Iron Flower, or a Vase Filled with Tears

I do not know how I found the courage to do this... I am not a writer or a philologist. Everything is attempted for the first time at some point. It is frightening, of course, but... nothing ventured, nothing gained! Besides, I am seventy-four years old!

You might say that, after fifty years, I met my first love again—and through the internet, no less. Yes, our encounters had been official, because we had studied in the same year at the university's faculty of law. From time to time, circumstances brought us together. I never allowed myself anything more: I was married. I call him “Janym,” which means “my soul.” I found him on the Odnoklassniki social network, with the help of my daughter, Jennet. I do not have the Odnoklassniki app on my phone. Some people do, but I do not. For reasons I never understood, I had simply been forbidden to install it. Never mind!

Jennet suggested that I look for old friends. That was when I remembered him. My husband, Murad, had already been gone for ten years. He died of a heart attack.

Jennet lived very far away from me, on the island of Cyprus. She had left because her personal life had not worked out here. Those were the times. Many people divorced, and she did too. She left her son in my care and went away—first to London, and then to Cyprus to earn a living. She was a nurse, found a job, and soon met a life partner. She married, gave birth to a son, and remained there. Jennet invited me to Cyprus several times. It was beautiful—the sea, the olive trees, the historic places. Yet it did not feel right to me. Home was better. But that is not what my story is about, at least not yet.

I was at home with my grandson; Jennet was in Cyprus. She posted my photograph on Odnoklassniki, and he responded—my “Janym,” as I called my first love. He was shocked, even though my daughter had written to him, “My mother does not want to talk to you.” He almost demanded that we communicate. His Odnoklassniki history contained photographs of his family, his children, and his grandchildren. He was seventy-six then. My emotions overwhelmed my soul, and I could not cope with them. I am writing my story in the present tense.

Tears, tears that I cannot stop. Something has to be done about this. I must find a way out! And perhaps the way out is to write about what I am going through. What else can I do? I do not know...

It turns out to be a deadly state of mind when, after half a century, you meet your first love again—even if only virtually, through the internet. At first it seems like a game or mere curiosity, but what follows is frightening. I advise no one to meet a love from the past. Feelings like these are not to be played with, because they are given to us from above, by God. It was as though I had opened Pandora's box. That is from Greek mythology, by the will of the god Zeus. Only hope remained at the bottom. I do not know the tale very well myself, but I know that Zeus, in his anger, sent his relatives a box of gifts, and when they opened it, misfortunes rained down upon them. Everything is fine with us, but when it comes to the feelings that returned from the past, it truly is no simple matter. So much water has flowed under the bridge; it is frightening to remember!

There were nine children in the family into which I was born—five girls and four boys. My mother was illiterate, while my father had studied in the center of our great Motherland and worked in the highest circles of society. In short, we lived under the Soviet Union. At first my father worked in the state security agencies, and later in the government, where he held senior posts. Then he began to descend the same ladder—the farther he went, the lower he fell... Honest people devoted to the state were no longer needed. I will not delve into politics; it is unsafe. I was the sixth child in the family. I was born in December, after the terrible earthquake. By the zodiac, I am a Sagittarius-Ophiuchus. They say it is a powerful sign.

The entire family went hungry. My mother had little milk, and she obtained food with ration cards. I was terribly thin and red-haired. They constantly made me sleep so I would not ask for food. There was nowhere to dry my nappies. People said, “It is a wonder she survived at all!”

Our clan belongs to the Ahal-Teke tribes of the Oghuz-Seljuk Turkmens. Our ancestors bred the most beautiful Ahal-Teke horses and wove the most beautiful carpets in the world. As for genetic origins, it should be noted that the Turkmens were originally the forebears of the Ottoman Turks.

Later they mixed with other tribes and became simply Turks. The other Turkmen tribes do not particularly like us, the Ahal-Teke people. They think we are arrogant and do not want to work—that is, to do physical labor. We apparently belong to a Euro-Mongoloid type, because the Mongols conquered us and probably left their mark.

My family looks European. Some families look Arab, Iranian, and so on. Where I was born, there are excavations of a palace of Alexander the Great. In general, it was part of the ancient Parthian state.

I was an energetic child and a fighter, constantly brawling with my brothers. I hated having my hair combed, so they always shaved my head. Adults took me to the barber holding sticks in both hands so that I would not run away. Our neighbors in the city also had large families. Some had even more children than we did. Mothers were true heroines! In those days, it was prestigious to be named a Mother Heroine. Turkmen women did not have abortions. My mother learned that neighbors with many children were sending theirs to a music boarding school, and she decided to "push" me in there too. It was prestigious, and it would "kill two birds with one stone": discipline me and give me at least some education, even though I knew absolutely nothing about music. I was accepted into the Republican Music School—my father still had influence. I played the violin and, as a secondary instrument, the piano. We were also taught solfeggio, music theory, music literature, and so on.

In summer, the music school sent us to a holiday camp in the Gorge. There were tents, mountains, and a fast-flowing river of cold water. We lived under the open sky. Silence. During the three months I stayed there, my eldest brother visited me only once or twice—and even then, he had come to gather twigs for brooms. In the past, yards were swept with plant brooms. Those yard brooms had a very strange smell. My eldest sister, I think, came once as well. No one felt sorry for me. I sat all alone by the river and cried from homesickness. Later I grew used to it. We hiked in the mountains and picked blackberries. Films were brought to us and shown the old-fashioned way. All of us children were delighted! In the evenings we took gray bread with onions or garlic and ate it. For us, that was

a great pleasure. There was so much that was interesting and unknown. Gradually I became accustomed to the place, and during the five years I studied there, I grew strong in spirit and character. I became somewhat cold toward my relatives. I began to treat them almost like strangers, though I still loved them. There is much more I could tell. During those years I repeated a grade twice, skipped lessons, climbed into the attic with the other children, and played cards there—“Durak,” and, I think, “Twenty-One.” I no longer remember properly, and I have forgotten how to play. I beat up everyone in my class, and no one could defeat me. I practiced gymnastics. Eventually, the music-school administration decided to send me home to my parents.

In the fifth grade, I began attending an ordinary school while living with my parents. I made friends—more than enough of them. Everyone wanted to be friends with me, though I still do not know why. By then I had calmed down and become quiet. From a hooligan, I turned into a modest, almost invisible girl. I grew up, became tall, and turned into a pretty tomboy with chestnut hair, fair skin, and European features. Boys looked at me, but until the end of my school years I remained a tomboy and saw boys as I saw my girlfriends. I cared only about my girlfriends, the lively life at school, and the life I shared with them outside school. I left home only to visit them. Their homes fascinated me. They prepared different dishes for lunch; everything was beautiful and prosperous. There was music, songs, chansons—in short, everything I had never seen in my own life. In exchange, I taught my Armenian girlfriends mathematics, because I knew the subject well, and helped them with other subjects too: “you help me, I help you.” That is how life works. Yet by nature I was not calculating; I was simple, quiet, and obedient.

I often stayed late at a friend's house in the evenings. Only my mother worried and called me home. Of course, after school I cleaned the house, washed the floors, and fired the coal stove every day. Only then did I go to my friend, my hands constantly black from coal. I had grown accustomed to communal life and unaccustomed to family life. My life with my girlfriends is a separate chapter of my story. And so my school years ended—years about which I could tell many more interesting stories.

After finishing school, I decided to study law. I enlisted my mother's help so that she would speak to acquaintances and arrange support for my university application.

Everyone did that then. Connections were what mattered most, although I was not a poor student myself. I believe I studied well, but in those days national cadres like me were not valued. Some teachers discriminated against me. They regarded us locals as second-class members of society and made sure I knew my place. At the time, I did not understand any of this. My father was an ardent communist and never discussed such matters. He was very strict. My brother, two years older than I, and I went to a Russian school rather than a national one. At first it was difficult, but later everything began to flow naturally.

A completely different life began. I gathered my documents for Turkmen State University: certificates, certificates, and still more certificates—proof that I had worked for two years alongside school, papers from the clinic, and so on.

My girlfriends and I went our separate ways. I had to review everything I had studied.

The day came to submit my documents. I stood in line among crowds of applicants, all kinds of people. I was wearing a long national dress. Because I had never worn one before, I felt terribly uncomfortable, completely out of place. Just as I reached the window, someone shouted, “Collective-farm girl!” They had probably seen the employment certificate I had obtained from relatives at a collective farm.

Then they announced a preparatory program for applicants. What a nightmare! When was I supposed to come? And once I arrived, where was I supposed to go, which office should I enter? I understood nothing; everyone was a stranger.

The examination day came. I especially remember the written composition. I had hidden a thousand cheat sheets here and there. After the exam, as I walked back down the corridor, all the notes fell out of one of my pockets. Terrified, I barely managed to gather them up. I was ashamed, but I got through it, thank God!

I do not even remember the first days of classes now. Our year was divided into two groups. I put on my long national dress. I was a modern, attractive, proud, fair-skinned girl. Some of the other girls came from collective farms. There were few women in our year; the law faculty mostly admitted men. The main

group had twenty-five students. Later they recruited a second group of twenty-five, bringing the total to fifty. I was in the first group. The city girls had their circle, and the village girls had theirs. During all five years, we had almost no contact with the village girls. Looking back now, I find it strange. We crossed paths occasionally, of course, but very, very rarely.

Then he appeared on the horizon—my Janym. He was of average height, perhaps just a little taller than I. At first glance, there was nothing remarkable about him. He was not my type. Yet he had European features, fair skin, eyes black as coal, and eyebrows black as night. His gaze was sharp. He was a provincial boy, but modern, and two years older than I. He was the favorite of the entire year; almost every girl was in love with him—except me. I paid him no attention. There were tall, handsome young men in our year, though some were already married, which made them taboo for us. My Janym's father was Asian, while his mother was of Jewish origin. He looked Jewish. Neither then nor now did we pay much attention to ancestry; it was not customary, except within families when a girl was to marry. In short, he was of mixed heritage and had an Asian temperament. He regarded himself as a local and understood the local language. He was everyone's favorite. For some reason, the girls were drawn to him.

According to the Muslim calendar, I was born in a month associated with journeys and visits to holy places—“zyyarat.” And “Gul” means flower, so that was what they called me in our year: “Gul,” or “Gulya.”

And so university life began: first friends, first encounters with lecturers. I no longer remember many details. I found a friend named Maya. It turned out that she had been a neighbor in my childhood, but her family moved away and I forgot them. Our circle was cheerful, and many people envied us. Others began forming their own groups of girlfriends and friends. I did not look at the young men; none of them truly appealed to me. Those who did were already married.

I was probably very taciturn. I did not say much. People described me as “very, very quiet.” In reality, I was a panther—cold and untamable. I spoke to almost no one and made no friends except one. As my Janym later said—though at that time he was certainly not mine—

he began to tease me. When classes ended and everyone started leaving the lecture hall, he would take my bag and rummage through it. I was furious—simply beside myself! Had I been strong enough, I would have killed him. I came to hate him. Some time later, when most people had left, he grabbed my coat, taunted me, and threw it onto the last desk. My anger knew no bounds. And then again, and again. It continued through the entire academic year. Once he cut off the tips of my hair and put them in his pocket. I gradually became used to his antics, and when he was away for a long time, I grew bored and missed him. That was how I began to fall in love with him. He sensed it too and became closer and closer to me. He courted me for a long time, but neither then nor now did I know what other life he led outside the university walls, nor did I try to find out. He was not my ultimate goal. My whole life still lay ahead.

Another close friend from my student years was named Bahar, which means spring. Like me, she was Russian-speaking. We found common ground and shared many interests. She approached me and, in a way, offered friendship. By then, Maya had begun spending time with another girl whom I disliked. Maya said, “Let us bring her into our circle too.” Naturally, I was against it and began spending time with Bahar instead. I liked lively, energetic, interesting people, and that was exactly what she was. She was a romantic amateur photographer, generous and sensible, and she never missed classes. I sometimes did, but then I needed a medical certificate, so in practice I missed almost none. Bahar took her studies very seriously. She was the one who found a way into my heart. Perhaps she found me interesting. She came to my home and gradually became like a member of the family. We told one another everything, shared our secrets, and needed no outsiders. Everything remained between us; neither of us betrayed the other's confidences. That kind of friendship suited us. We were like sisters.

Meanwhile, I grew more and more attached to Janym and fell ever more deeply in love with him, though I tried not to show it. He would later say,

“Of course I knew, but I still had doubts. I could not say it with certainty.”

During our first year, while we were doing practical training in the authorities, he went down on his knees and asked for my hand. There were witnesses. Perhaps it was a joke, or perhaps he was serious. I answered in the same spirit: “Whoever marries me will have to pay a bride price so large that you could never afford it.” We owed each other nothing. We barely even spoke or socialized—not a “Hello,” not a “Goodbye.” He understood that I was beyond his reach. I understood that he was beyond mine because he was not of my nationality. Janym realized that I could simply “drop” him—remove him from my attention. Incidentally, he never doubted that.

The turbulent days passed. New meetings, new acquaintances, intrigues. At last the holidays approached. My “trainer,” as I jokingly called the Janym who had been training me all year, suggested that during the break I go to the main post office, because he wanted to write me a poste-restante letter. I had never encountered such a thing before. It intrigued me.

The summer was dull. I no longer remember the details. What I do remember is that my friend Maya and I obtained a last-minute voucher to the Chuli holiday resort near Ashgabat. It was beautiful, a corner of paradise. The icy Chulinka River flowed there, with green trees everywhere—even while the temperature in the city reached forty or forty-five degrees Celsius. Again there were new acquaintances and new girlfriends. I did not want to meet young men and ran away from them. Maya found herself a fiancé. They had an affair, and I hardly saw her. She had, as people say, finally let herself go. Her fiancé proposed. Yet as quickly as everything began, it ended just as quickly. I do not know why; I did not ask. It did not interest me, although the young man was interesting—an athlete of mixed heritage, with red hair.

In short, we “killed two birds with one stone,” perhaps even three. First, we had a holiday. Second, we passed our assessments successfully. And in addition, my friend found a fiancé. Only I, a mad fool, could drag a friend off on holiday during examination season! That was me: once I wanted something, I simply did it. Yet those days were unforgettable.

Some time after we returned home, I remembered the post office and thought, Why not? I had become bored, and there really was a letter from Janym waiting for me. I no longer remember exactly what he wrote and never paid much attention to the details. But these words were certainly there: “Dum spiro, spero”—“While I breathe, I hope.” I was delighted and immediately came alive after my boredom. Yet it was not an overwhelming love. I wrote something in reply, quoting verses by ancient Eastern poets because I had nothing else at hand—passionate poems about love, saying I would follow him through fire and water. I even sent him a lipstick kiss. Then I forgot all about it. My childhood girlfriends lived a house away. We had studied in the same class. They were Armenian, and friendship between our peoples was not especially common. Their parents loved me, however, because during our school years I had taught their daughters mathematics. I spent the rest of the summer with them.

Then the first of September arrived. I was in my second year. I had forgotten everything, including love. I was walking toward the university when, suddenly, Janym appeared before me with a shovel in his hands, digging a small flower bed. I flinched with embarrassment, remembering what I had written in reply to his letter. Meanwhile, he had reflected and concluded that I did, after all, love him. Yet even then mine was a kind of tomboy's love. I did not fully understand what love was. It was probably infatuation.

Classes began. Some lecturers picked on me relentlessly. Perhaps they wondered whether this attractive girl had protectors, whether anyone would stand up for her, and deliberately gave me failing marks. But there was always someone willing to defend me. My Janym came from a velayat, a province, so he was given a place in a dormitory. Apparently, he received a tiny room. It had once been a utility space and had been converted into a little bedroom. In those days, such a privilege was difficult to obtain and was not granted to everyone.

My relationship with Janym was built as though we lived for one day at a time. Whatever happened today, we forgot tomorrow. I asked him no questions, and he asked none of me. We did not even know each other's birthdays. Much later I learned that someone had told him, “Do not even try. Gulka will never be yours.” Perhaps that angered him.

To this day I know almost nothing about him. We flew through life and lived on feelings alone. He promised that one day he would tell me many things, yet he never did. He withdrew into a shell, hiding like a man in a case. Something troubled him deeply. My own soul was open; I had nothing to hide. I was an open book, a blank sheet of paper.

When I came home after classes, my poor mother had lunch ready for everyone. I cleaned the house only on Sundays. I did the family's laundry in the washing machine, ironed it, and heated the bathhouse. By then the stove had been converted to gas. After cleaning, I spent time with my girlfriends from the neighborhood. When I went to bed, a shaded portrait of Alain Delon hung above me. He was a handsome and famous French actor. My father did not allow me to stay out late and kept an eye on me. Sometimes we quarreled over it. Changes were already taking place in the family: one sibling married, then another. All sorts of things happened. A brother older than I died under circumstances we did not understand. We do not speak publicly about it. That is another story.

The young men in our year kept their distance and did not look at me. It turned out that my Janym had warned every man on the course: “Gulya is mine. Do not go near her.” And they obeyed. Janym was quick-witted, educated, and good-looking. As I have said, he was of mixed heritage and two years older than I.

Apparently, he did not waste his time. He found a girlfriend who was prepared to do anything for him, and he was ready to marry. Perhaps nature demanded it. I gave him nothing. Jewish blood! I showed no reaction. I remained cold, though somewhere in a corner of my subconscious I naturally put a mental check mark beside it. In short, he married. He said nothing and did not make it public. That was his right. I had not yet fully understood anything; I was still floating through life. He was slowly killing me, like an incurable disease that destroys a person little by little. My mind understood nothing. Perhaps that was fortunate; otherwise I would never have endured five years at the institute.

Love is not a collection of facts. It is a tightening in the heart; it is the soul taking flight. It is the soul's freedom of will, when soul and heart enter every corner of your body. Nothing can be done to stop it—not by him, nor by

neither by me. We had no obligations to one another. As a passionate man, he had the right to marry. I learned to swallow everything in silence. Resentment sat deep inside me, but I accepted it and showed nothing. I was a free Cossack!

Every academic year, beginning sometime in September, students were apparently sent to collective farms to pick cotton. I was always with my friend Bahar in the cotton fields. I gathered very little—about fifteen kilograms a day. Janym picked a great deal, which meant he already knew how to do it. I had no such skill. I was weak, while he was physically strong. There he befriended some of the girls from our year. I was “indifferent.” Eventually he could bear it no longer and began approaching Bahar and me. He came to me and tried to speak from the heart. He began by saying how strong-willed I was. He was also jealous of a young man who liked me. That man also studied law, but by correspondence. His name was Ashir.

Once, some girls and boys from the dormitory and I were sitting around a table in the common room. I normally did not enter the dormitory. For us city people, doing so was considered improper, almost as though we were lowering ourselves. Those were the customs; there was nothing to be done. Ashir was sitting at the table too. I looked at him: a tall, handsome young man studying law. Out of boredom, I flirted a little and thought, “That is all—no further action.” Yet afterward he pursued me relentlessly. It was dreadful. He invited me to a restaurant during the day. I was cold as ice. He gave me something for my birthday, invited me for tea at the flat where he rented a room, and proposed marriage. He sent matchmakers; his parents were supposed to visit our home. But I refused. No, and that was final. I did not want him. Even some of the young men in our year said, “He is a fine match.” That was why Janym asked me about him and even mentioned his surname. He was jealous. I remained silent and answered nothing. Ashir did not exist for me. I felt no attraction to him, because the cause of my coldness was Janym.

Poor Ashir. I had promised him absolutely nothing, but he hoped for something. We met now and then, walked around the city, and talked about this and that. He invited me to a restaurant at lunchtime, then to the flat where he lodged. We drank tea there, nothing more. Perhaps he hoped for something greater,

perhaps a kiss, but nothing of the kind happened. Ashir waited for my birthday. I avoided him and wanted no meetings, but he gave me an expensive present—fabric for a dress. In those days, accepting such gifts was considered improper. He placed me in an awkward position and made me materially indebted to him. Proud and independent as I was, I decided to wait for his birthday. I bought gifts of equal value—a fur scarf and a shirt—and gave them to him. Ashir later told me that he wore the scarf for a long time.

He visited me once much later, when I was already a trainee judge and pregnant with my third child. He came to my workplace.

I have strayed from the story a little...

He did something truly mad when he somehow transferred into our year. He had been studying by correspondence. One day I saw Ashir sitting in our lecture hall. He remained there for the entire day. I was shocked and asked him what he was doing in our class. He said he had transferred to full-time study. Apparently, he had good friends in the dean's office who had arranged it. He sat with us for two or three days. Then I told him, “If you stay in our year, I will end all contact with you.” Thank God he listened and left.

Once Janym invited me to the Kosmos cinema. I no longer remember which film we saw, strangely enough. Of course I went with him. We were like friends. It is curious to love someone and still behave as friends. He allowed himself nothing improper. He gave me hope and behaved honorably. Nothing happened between us. In our time, it was possible—and necessary—to be that way. Toward the end, I no longer resisted his invitations, because I saw nothing wrong in them.

I remember walking home with him after a film. We must have talked about something on the way, though I do not know what—perhaps about nothing. It simply felt good to walk together. Suddenly Ashir appeared coming toward us with friends, including some of our fellow students. At the time, I suspected nothing. I was young and did not care what anyone thought. I decided my own fate. What was strange about it? Who had arranged the encounter? So many questions. To this day my Janym

tells me nothing. He is a clever Jew, not a fool like me. I was frivolous then, with the wind in my head; not even a reed seemed to rustle. Apparently, the companion walking with us had arranged the whole thing. Our relationship with Ashir would probably have ended there.

But there was one more meeting. He arranged to see me at seven in the evening near my home. I wrote a note saying that I did not love him and asked my little sister to deliver it. The poor child took it to him. She said that he cried.

Some time later I met him, and Ashir told me that my heart was made of stone. He pointed to a cobblestone lying on the ground. That was the whole story between us. I understood that I had treated him cruelly, but I did not feel his suffering. I forgot everything, yet later fate took revenge on me for him—or perhaps for something else. Forgive me, Lord!

My heart and soul were drawn only to Janym, and everything that happened to me was because of him. Janym had a wife beside him, a woman who could comfort and feed him at any time. I had only wind in my head and, at times, a terrible longing. That was one side of my life.

There was another side, even a third: my life at my parents' home. Matchmakers came constantly. That was customary among us, and I always refused. In our youth, only girls who stayed at home and did not study beyond secondary school were considered worthy of a high bride price and gifts. Girls with higher education were “cheaper”; they were regarded as wayward and brought only a small bride price. Perhaps that is why a hundred matchmakers streamed to our house. In our family almost all the children either had higher education or were studying at universities.

Every morning I got up, washed, dressed, ate breakfast, and ran to class through heat or cold. Bus number twelve took me to the university. This continued every day for five years—a small yellow bus, packed with passengers from early morning.

Perhaps I waited for him to enter the lecture hall, and he waited for me, though neither of us showed it. Even now,

one woman from our year—a fiery, tempestuous person—is amazed that Janym loved me. She learned about it only recently, because she herself had secretly loved him, and told me what a quiet little creature I had seemed. In her mind, that meant I had done everything secretly.

Sometimes Janym entered the lecture hall and sat beside me if there was an empty seat. The lecturer spoke while he took my hand and held it beneath the desk. At the time, this was considered shameful—what if someone saw? I turned red with anger, while he delighted in provoking me. Then, as though nothing had happened, he might simply rise and leave. Once he wrote on the board, “I love Gulya,” though afterward he erased it with a wet cloth. That was how deeply attached to him I became.

I remember bringing salted aubergines from home once. How did I ever think of doing such a thing? He himself had asked me to bring him something to eat. We sat on a bench near the university's main entrance while he ate those salted aubergines. There was nothing else to eat.

We hardly spoke in the lecture hall. He had his life, and I had mine. I was always with my girlfriends; as for him, I did not know where or with whom he spent his time. I knew nothing about his family life and did not want to. Apparently, he did not want me to know either. His wife never appeared in our circle. No one knew when she came or left—almost no one. Only a Jew could hide things so well! Perhaps he feared I would learn more than I should. I have forgotten much of it now.

A great deal of time passed. When I was home, I spent my free time with my friend Edisa. She proved to be my most loyal friend, faithful to the end of her days.

One summer, something happened at home. We were sitting on the ground in the courtyard. That was how people lived then. Nowadays everyone has raised platforms, swings, and so on. Of course, we were not on bare earth, but on beautiful Asian carpets and felt rugs. Our mother served her children okroshka, the summer soup everyone loved. I began to eat when my youngest brother came up behind me. I had four brothers, and the youngest was the family's favorite. Our mother loved him more than anyone. She served him and kept the best of everything for him. We did not object; our mother had decided it, and her actions were law. In our culture boys were cherished, while girls

were treated as though they were second-class. Our father, by contrast, loved us girls because he had been raised in a European manner and had grown up in a boarding school.

So my youngest brother came up behind me without my noticing and kicked me hard in the back. “Mother made this okroshka for me and brought it to me, you she-goat!” he said. I had never encountered such insolence in my life and allowed no one to treat me that way. From childhood I had been raised in fighting traditions. I found a medium-sized stone and hurled it at him with all my strength. It struck the front of his head, apparently where a vein ran. Blood streamed down his face. He rushed at me, but I was not frightened. Everyone nearby began restraining him. Neighboring boys and young men came running at the shouting and took him to their house. That ended the incident.

Of course, all sorts of things happen in families. Next time, he would know better. Otherwise, our household was quiet and calm because everyone feared our father. He was very strict.

Throughout my student years, Bahar was beside me. She was loyal and devoted; we were inseparable and ready to go through fire and water together. We had not yet passed through the “brass trumpets” of fame. We prepared for terms and examinations together and stayed at each other's homes until late. Then we accompanied one another to the last bus. There were no taxis then, and young women could not get into a stranger's car. Our parents waited for us. Taxis were beyond a student's means.

Bahar and I discussed everything in the world—the weather, what we needed to buy, and the girls in the lecture hall. We knew almost nothing about the men. We did not admit other girls into our circle; it was only the two of us. Some girls resented us. Bahar seemed almost a professional photographer to me. She had a Zenit camera, a single-lens reflex, I think. At the time it was the finest kind of camera. She earned authority and respect. She was disciplined, educated, and modern, as people used to say. She was about my height, though I thought she was perhaps two centimeters taller. Compared with me she was dark-complexioned, with a long, slightly hooked nose because her father was Kurdish. The girls said she was Kurdish, but I never asked her. Her mother was local, and the whole family was regarded as belonging to the local nationality. Bahar and I had such

a strong friendship that one could have searched high and low and never found its equal. Yet I never told her the deepest secret in my soul. In the end, after we graduated and were assigned to our workplaces for a two-year internship, she betrayed me as Judas betrayed Jesus. But that is another story.

Let me continue. Bahar's family consisted of her parents, three sisters, and two brothers. She kept trying to arrange a marriage between me and one of her brothers. Apparently it was not meant to be. I respected her elder brother, but at the time I had no thoughts about him. My parents would not have agreed to such a marriage anyway. He was a decent, modest, hardworking man. She also proposed another relative, but nothing came of that either. He was from an educated family and understood that it would not work. Perhaps he disliked my behavior. I was too cold and indifferent. We went to the cinema only once.

My brother, two years older than I, returned from the army. His nickname was Repa; his name was Rejep. I decided to introduce him to Bahar. We set a day and time. The three of us dressed, met, and decided to take the bus to the university, where there were beautiful places and an avenue. The bus was packed. We rode and rode, but when Bahar and I got off, my brother was nowhere to be seen. We had no idea where to look. After three years in the army, he did not know the city well. Everything was new to him, and he had alighted too early. Later he said, “Some girls got off, and I thought it was you.” Apparently they were not destined to come together. God did not will it.

Some time later, my brother died. That is another story. Perhaps that was why the meeting was not meant to happen. He was handsome and courageous, with no obvious faults. There was something else, and he paid for it. In life, everyone must answer for what they do. I loved him. He was my dearest brother.

Bahar also had a youngest sister—pretty, modest, and intelligent. Bahar and I decided to introduce her to my youngest brother, the one with whom I had once fought and quarreled. They met. Everything was wonderful. They liked one another, and she even fell in love with him.

But again, some shaitan entered their relationship. “Shaitan” means the devil, an unclean force. This shaitan turned out to be my brother's friend and neighbor. One day the neighbor invited them to a birthday party, and their romance ended before it had properly begun. The friend said something to my younger brother about the girl's appearance. That is what the influence of friends can do. The sentence was carried out: my brother stopped seeing her.

The neighbor himself did not live long. He died in an accident after being electrocuted. As the proverb says, “Man proposes, God disposes.” How true. The Almighty did not wish to unite me with their family, nor them with ours. Fate was cruel, and that is how matters turned out. To me it is clear that young people then took nothing seriously. For the pain inflicted on the girl, God punished the man who had separated two young hearts. Evil fate played a joke on them.

These events did not affect my friendship with Bahar—not then. Still, I think her family was offended, and later these incidents played a negative role in our relationship. But that came after graduation.

Life followed its course. We were friends, and I had no complexes. Everything happened by the will of God. Days, weeks, months, and years passed.

My Janym also had admirers, and there were many of them. He had an Asian temperament and a Jewish mind. I did not dwell on it and felt no real jealousy. I too was bathed in attention. Sometimes our year went on excursions into the countryside: beautiful mountains, a river, cool air, many trees and groves. I rarely joined them. Janym rarely went either.

Then his daughter was born. His joy was obvious; he wanted children very much. I accepted every event calmly. It never occurred to me that a time would come when all of this might end and we would all go our separate ways.

Janym still did not leave me alone. Sometimes we went to the cinema, though very rarely. We did not speak in the lecture hall; when we did, it was only as friends. At times Janym invited me to his little nook, his room. He would be occupied with something while I sat and listened to his stories. He spoke about his wife and their quarrels. I no longer remember the details.

I cannot even say now which year of study it was. One day I went to his room with him, as usual suspecting nothing. Janym came very close to me. I did not even understand how he laid me on the bed or what was happening. What was I supposed to do? I did not think about it. It seemed as though everything was happening exactly as it should.

Afterward, his whole body turned out to be scratched. Could I really have scratched him so badly, Lord? He told me that nothing had happened—not what you may be thinking. Everything was all right; there had been nothing. I never fully understood it myself. He sat on the windowsill and cried. I stood beside him, unable to understand why he was crying or what had happened. Then I went home alone.

At home, my father came to me and asked what was wrong. He had never asked me such a question before. I went silently into my room, and after that I remember nothing. No one had ever explained relations between a young man and a young woman to me. I expected nothing bad. My Babai—my Janym—had not touched me with so much as a finger.

Yes, I truly did marry as my parents wished, a young man of my own nationality. A large bride price and expensive gifts were given for me. Had anything been “wrong,” I would have been sent back in disgrace. The laws of custom were severe then.

Everyone in our year grew wary. I do not know where information had leaked from. In the dormitory, people watched one another. Strange remarks were made about me. I endured all the filth. There were many envious people, but I paid no attention because I did not feel guilty. Eventually they fell silent; they understood nothing. I understood nothing myself. The main thing is that Janym and I had never even kissed, and apparently such things can happen. People may not believe it. It is something to ponder, like in an Indian film. Life can be like that—unfathomable.

I told no one, certainly not my girlfriends. I was independent of them. I loved him deeply, yet I became a victim—an iron flower. I withstood the pack of wolves in our year, who looked ready to devour me because a flower like that is not given to everyone.

Perhaps my Janym wanted to prove that this flower belonged to him and to no one else.

Days and weeks passed. State examinations, assessments, projects, and the diploma thesis approached. I chose my thesis topic and wrote the entire work myself.

Once a friend of Janym came from the province, the velayat where they lived. The four of us—Bahar, Janym, his friend, and I—went to Lenin Square. It was beautiful, filled with flowers, with a monument to Lenin. We took photographs there and then went to a jewelry shop. I had not expected him to take me into a shop—we were poor students. He said, “Choose whatever you want.” I was not mercenary and selected amber beads. They were genuine amber and I liked them very much. He bought them for me wholeheartedly. I no longer remember his friend's name.

On the way, the friend asked whether I was afraid my parents would scold me. I gave no answer. I was not afraid. At that time Janym was ready to divorce and marry me. But I loved my parents deeply and could not betray them. What did you think—that I was foolish? Or perhaps that I should wash away my sins? I believe it is impossible to deceive someone for five years in a row. Personally, I never gave him any hope that we could be together.

One day an honors student came to me and said, “Do you know what your Janym told me? He said he is only with you temporarily. It is just a student amusement.” I, poor soul, endured so much from my fellow students. I remained silent because I had made no claim on his hand or heart. Perhaps it had been his friend's idea to buy the beads. All kinds of thoughts entered my head. They were born from my feelings for him.

Gradually, I began to understand that everything comes to an end. After the final examinations, we would have to part.

I fell into depression. Janym sensed it and invited me to an ice-cream café. I must have lost a great deal of weight. He comforted me. We talked about this and that, then parted.

There was bustle everywhere, while my heart was heavy. I had come to love him very, very deeply, yet I held myself together. Janym

was, in fact, no one to me. He alone decided every aspect of our relationship. I could not simply speak to him whenever I wished. And what would we have talked about? Nothing. Everything was always decided according to his wishes. My opinion did not count. I was quiet and taciturn.

Still, the most important decision remained mine. I stayed with my parents, and he stayed with his family. Everything was settled.

I passed my examinations with “good” marks and defended my diploma thesis with an “excellent.” I did all the work myself, without help. I did not ask how Bahar was doing, and she did not ask how I was preparing. Each person was for herself. There were no mobile phones then, and not every household had a landline. Neither our family nor Bahar's had one. Our mothers had many children and feared that a telephone would spoil their daughters by allowing boys to call. In any case, obtaining a home telephone line was almost impossible.

And yet Janym and I still seemed to breathe as one. At last came the long-awaited end of university. I was walking alone and still had to report to the military recruitment office. We girls were liable for military service. We had studied nursing and civil defense; in short, we were reserve nurses—soldiers.

Near First Park, someone began walking rapidly behind me. I turned and saw Janym. I stopped. He began to speak; as always, I remained silent. He talked, but I heard no masculine certainty in his words. He sounded like a schoolboy. “So you are leaving like this, abandoning me. If you marry, you will be unhappy. I am divorcing my wife,” he said. He had mentioned divorce before, but I had never understood exactly what he meant. He was not even sure of himself. Even had I believed him, nothing in my life would have changed in relation to him. Besides, he already had a child. For me, marrying a married man—especially one with a child—would have been a disgrace. You understand. And he was not even certain of his own decision.

As always, I said nothing. I listened, and we parted. That was our last meeting and farewell as students. Later, after I was married, I saw him two or three times

when our colleagues gathered for events in Janym's office. By then he had become an important figure in the prosecutor's system—the head of the investigations department for especially important cases.

The university dean's office assigned me to work at the State Agro-Industrial Committee. I signed the papers. I had to work there for two years or risk not receiving my diploma. Two months later, I began. I had no practical experience as legal counsel—where could I have obtained it? I knew only theory, mainly civil and criminal law. I decided to push ahead and learn on the job. I was not timid.

I was appointed as the lawyer for the machinery and electrical supplies administration. There were claims, lawsuits, and other matters. The head of the administration was of medium height, stocky, self-satisfied, and rather interesting. They welcomed me warmly. He was also the elder brother of a lawyer who had studied one year below me. He showed me the legal office. A personnel-department employee also worked there. Her name, I think, was Roza. She was tall, divorced, and had a daughter. She showed me my desk, the safe, the keys, and the claims files, which were called dossiers. I was introduced to all the staff. Everyone became curious, and people began visiting the office for one reason or another.

The administration had a large staff. Most claims concerned shortages of spare parts in newly delivered machinery and equipment, along with many other disputes.

I threw myself into the work. I was the only lawyer. On the ground floor of the building there was another administration, responsible for forestry and electrical equipment. An elderly man named San Sanych Makedonsky worked there as legal counsel. I was lucky. Every five minutes I ran to him for advice. He never objected and helped me gladly. He was eighty years old then—Alexander Alexandrovich Makedonsky. I am grateful to him. He was an excellent man and a true professional. His office was tucked away at the end of a corridor, almost in an annex. As far as I know, legal advisers were not valued in those days. Management could not do without them, yet lawyers irritated administrators because they knew too much about shortages and other problems. Makedonsky gave me many regulations and rules

that could not be bought in bookshops or found even in the Ministry of Justice libraries.

I worked diligently to master the profession of legal counsel: claims, lawsuits, arbitration. At the manager's instruction, I also audited debits and credits in the accounts department. I had to sign off on breakages of glass equipment and, in the personnel department, certify the legality of orders. There was no shortage of work.

People said that a pair of snakes—a male and a female—lived in Makedonsky's office. Before entering, he would knock so that they could crawl back into their hole. Naturally, I was a little afraid. Life was never dull.

In my soul I constantly flew back to Janym, then forced myself to return. I worked there for an entire year. There was no shortage of suitors, but I made no attempt to find out anything about Janym—how he was or where he was. I tried to forget him. I had to build a personal life of my own.

One day I went to the manager and asked permission to resign. Work in the agro-industrial system no longer interested me. I wanted to move on to a place where only lawyers worked. I entered his office expecting nothing unusual. Suddenly he begged me to stay and declared his love. I was stunned. Imagine it—it was almost impossible to believe. He was married. What did he expect after that? There were nearly tears in his eyes. Again, life had produced a surprise for me. How could I become involved with a married man, especially when I myself had never married? Even if I had been married, it would have changed nothing. In the end, he refused to authorize my resignation.

Then his deputy—a tall, red-haired Tatar—also declared his love and said he was divorcing his wife. I was shocked. I had to escape from there as soon as possible. There were unmarried men there too, but how was I to leave while still owing compulsory service? I had to think.

Meanwhile, Janym sent me greetings. I think he even telephoned, but I answered coldly. I decided to appeal personally to the chairman of the entire State Agro-Industrial Committee. At that same time, the mother of my friend Edisa, who lived near us, wanted to introduce me to Murad, my future husband. She invited him to her house and called me over to look him over. I reluctantly agreed, hoping I would reject him. I walked down a narrow corridor and saw

Murad sitting on a chair, his hands placed neatly on his knees like an obedient pupil. His face was tanned and dark. He had almost no hair—there was some, but very little, and it was cut short. He looked as though he had been brought in for questioning. I walked past and immediately told my friend that I did not like him. I thought the problem was solved and relaxed.

When I went to the chairman of the State Agro-Industrial Committee, he received me normally. I explained the situation and said I was unwell. He told me to see a doctor. Then he telephoned my manager and said that I was complaining about him, though I had done nothing of the kind. I sat there amazed. Some game was being played. In the end, Zubrilin told him, “Just let her go!”

Hurrah! Now I could think about a new job. I also had to arrange my personal life, because in those days remaining unmarried was considered shameful and made one an object of ridicule for neighbors and for my parents' enemies.

For the time being, I was still working there. It was winter. Murad came to my workplace even though I had rejected him. It turned out that he had searched for a long time to find where I worked and had first mistaken another woman for me. He had quite an adventure, but finally found me. My workplace was far from the city, in the Khitrovka district, where the pretrial detention center stood—in other words, the prison. A departmental vehicle took us there and brought us home.

Several months had passed since I first saw Murad. In that time he had become fairer and genuinely handsome—not merely pleasant, but handsome. He spoke Russian, though with an accent. He began coming to my workplace and walking me home. Sometimes we walked all the way, and on the road he told me extraordinary tales. No one had ever told me things like that: how, in unequal fights among young men, he had defeated them all. I listened open-mouthed and believed him. I knew nothing about a life like his. It fascinated me.

We began seeing each other. We went to the cinema and took walks. He gave me a perfume called “Perhaps,” Polish, I think. He dressed poorly. He owned one suit, a light-colored one, even in winter. But a person's material situation had never interested me. The person himself mattered. Then he began sending relatives as matchmakers. I had still not agreed to marry him. Yet he had already made a photograph of us together, like the picture on a wedding invitation, and

began distributing copies. I was dumbfounded and embarrassed for him. My reputation—my honor, so to speak—was already at stake.

Murad's father died when Murad was in the tenth grade. He was seventy. He had once been exiled as the grandson of an “enemy of the people” and accused of Trotskyism. They told him, “If you do not say you are a Trotskyist, we will shoot you.” That was how people were terrorized then—and the threats were not merely threats; they were carried out.

Murad's father could neither read nor write. Naturally, they forced a confession from him so that he would not be executed. He had no idea who Trotsky was. He served his sentence in Siberia and suffered frostbite in his fingers. He did not drink the alcohol ration but exchanged it for sugar. After completing his term, he returned home. He walked many kilometers and went hungry on the road.

Murad's mother was a very beautiful, blue-eyed woman. She was considered a great-granddaughter of the saint Ak Ishan, who was revered among the Teke Turkmens. People made pilgrimages to his grave as to a holy place. During the country's difficult years, Murad's mother learned to drive a tractor and wove Ahal-Teke carpets famous for their beauty.

The Ahal-Teke Turkmens are a refined people, renowned for breeding the world's most beautiful Ahal-Teke horses, weaving the world's most beautiful carpets, and creating the finest patterns in clothing. The Turkmens are the ancestors of the Oghuz, Seljuks, Huns, Saka, Scythians, and others. They are a great people.

Murad's mother was hardworking. Her first husband died of measles, leaving her with two children. He was only twenty-four. In those days, children in rural villages were not vaccinated against measles, and people died from the disease. Later she married Murad's father. Her own father took the children from her first marriage to raise them. She gave birth to six more children, though two died young of viral illnesses.

By the time I entered their household as a bride, Murad's mother was old and ill. The role of mother had been taken over entirely by the wife of the eldest brother. We later called this woman Pestimeya Makarovna, after the character in the television adaptation of *Gloomy River*. The serial was showing at the time, and the image suited her perfectly. She was the one who came to our house as matchmaker—not alone, of course, but with all the relatives.

Murad's eldest brother came as well. My older sisters fell in love with him, though he had a Russian-speaking Iranian wife and five children. Murad's relatives asked my mother for a photograph of me wearing a national dress. Meanwhile, without waiting for my final answer about marriage, Murad had invitation photographs made—only the date was missing. I was in shock.

Murad and his relatives lived in Khitrovka, a rough district where people from remote regions and other places had settled. Some had been forced to leave their native villages because local authorities would not allow them to remain there, considering them relatives of enemies of the people.

Before giving his daughter in marriage, my father visited their home to see how they lived. They had a privately owned planned house, as everyone in that area did. My father was told that a room had been set aside for Murad. There was supposedly a table at which he studied, a desk lamp, a proper workspace. My father was satisfied. Later it turned out to be a lie. There had never been any table. Murad lived with his mother in a temporary outbuilding and slept wherever he could, like a wanderer, often at friends' homes. At the same time, he was passionate about music and singing.

Pestimeya wasted no time. She sent Murad to Baku as a shuttle trader to buy goods. Scarves were fashionable then. Such trade was dangerous and considered speculation, a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment. Pestimeya feared nothing. Her husband, Murad's eldest brother, worked as a loader in a department store and used his own money to bring home scarce goods—bowls, teapots, cups, and the like—which she resold. What else could she do? There were ten children, a tiny salary, and mouths to feed. Abortion was haram, a sin against Allah.

In the end, I agreed to the wedding. Whatever would be, would be. I closed my eyes and tried not to think. The decision was hard; my soul was burdened. But I am brave by nature. Once I decide, I go through with it. And I did.

My friend Bahar offered to sew me a white wedding dress. I bought the fabric, but she cut it incorrectly and ruined it.

The dress was never made, and we could not afford another. I had to make do with a national dress. In the end, even that was unnecessary; as the saying goes, it fitted neither village nor city.

The wedding followed traditional rules, and nothing white or bridal was needed. The wedding night happened as people expected. Everyone was waiting for something, especially the many guests, and their expectations were satisfied.

The next day I barely came to my senses, and family life began. We were effectively expelled from the main planned house and placed in a temporary outbuilding at the far end of the courtyard. It had two rooms with a narrow corridor between them. Murad's mother lived in one; Murad and I were put in the other. There was no wooden floor, no boards at all—only bare earth. Someone found old runners and laid them down.

Pestimeya had ten small children, and every morning all of them—or perhaps not all, but certainly half—came to our outbuilding for breakfast, then lunch, then dinner. Can you imagine? I almost fainted. In my parents' home, each person ate breakfast independently and went about their business; sometimes we did not even see one another. I felt sorry for the children, but we had almost nothing to feed them. This was Pestimeya. These were her games against us.

We had to fetch water from the neighbors. I was not allowed to hang out laundry because it was considered improper. If I did, someone smeared it with soot. Cotton wool was thrown into the food I cooked. Children relieved themselves directly under our window. To use the toilet in the morning, one had to stand in a queue. What a sweet life, as the saying goes.

One morning I went to the tap in the courtyard to wash. I took a towel, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and soap. A scandal erupted at the tap. Like a fool—or a bluestocking—I had gone out to wash without suspecting anything. Apparently, women were not supposed to wash that way. They were not permitted to bring a towel, toothpaste, a brush, and soap. Pestimeya Makarovna came over and began tormenting me. I understood nothing at the time. Naturally, I could not bear it and

swore at her. I had grown up in a music boarding school where children used foul language. That was long ago; perhaps things are different now. Pestimeya almost fainted. No one had ever spoken to her as I did—and I was a daughter-in-law, supposedly a quiet daughter-in-law.

Winter approached. We had nothing with which to fire the cast-iron stove. Coal was worth its weight in gold then. Tears came to my eyes, and I became hysterical. When my father learned of it, he brought us an entire truckload of coal. I calmed down, and life went on.

I suffered two miscarriages, perhaps from the “good” life. Murad and I had not officially registered our marriage, so one day we decided to submit the application. Pestimeya opposed it and became aggressive. She did not want us to register, but we ignored her and filed the papers.

Murad had deceived me by claiming that he was in the fourth year of the polytechnic institute. In fact, he had been expelled because he had stopped attending classes in his second year. How naive I was; I believed everyone. I had been raised in a decent, respectable family where people did not lie and had never imagined that some solved their problems through deception. Never mind—one grows accustomed to everything in life.

I gave Murad an ultimatum: he had to be reinstated and continue his education, or I would leave and divorce him. I did not need an uneducated husband. I was a woman of principle. He had relatives and many friends at the institute, so he was quickly reinstated through connections and resumed his studies.

He had a beautiful voice. He also performed in amateur ensembles and went with friends to sing at weddings, earning money. He was not greedy and gave almost all his earnings to the musicians, keeping very little for himself.

So Murad began earning a little at weddings, though he had sung even before I joined his household. He also traveled to Baku for scarves. He had his own group of musicians. After weddings, they drank to relax. This too had begun before I came.

Once we quarreled. He had very beautiful eyes, like my Janym's—though my Janym's were more beautiful, of course. Under one eyebrow, on the eyelid, there was a scar. In childhood, his middle brother, whom they called Sasha, had damaged one eye with carbide. It was not very noticeable. Only when he closed his eyes or slept did one eyelid pull upward.

During one quarrel, I called him ugly. That one time—the only time in his life—he struck me on the forehead, and I developed a black eye. He never raised his hand against me again. He feared I would leave him. He loved me madly and was madly jealous. At first I even liked his jealousy. Later it became a catastrophe for me.

I wanted to love him as I loved my Janym. When he fell asleep during the day, I covered him. As a wife was expected to do, I served him breakfast, washed and ironed his clothes. That was how things were done in my parents' home. He accompanied me to work. My workplace was not far from Murad's house; we had to walk. I took his arm, and for an entire year we walked to work together.

But whenever he came home from work or elsewhere, he had a habit of throwing everything on the floor—his clothes, I mean. That was how he had been raised. One could say no one had raised him at all. He had apparently grown up like a gypsy. He sat on the floor in his trousers, so they tore constantly, almost every day. Every day something had to be mended, washed, and ironed. No one had ever ironed for him before; his family barely knew that clothes should be ironed. To me it was all astonishing. Today most fabrics are synthetic and can be worn without ironing, but in those days everything was cotton.

During this period, as I have said, I had two miscarriages, one at two months and one at four. I underwent serious treatment, and Murad and I visited holy places.

By then I had begun distancing myself from him and sleeping separately. When he slept, he spat heavily, with all the accompanying unpleasantness, and it landed on me. He was not especially concerned. He truly did not care about anything. He noticed none of it, but these were the first steps that pushed me away from him.

My entire world and consciousness were occupied by family life, whatever that life was. I had to grow accustomed to everything; there was no alternative.

For all his faults, Murad did everything he could to please me. I believed the past was over and that I had no right to remember it. Sometimes I dreamed of my Janym, and my heart would ache all day. I showed no reaction. That was all. I became steel.

My parents knew how miserable my situation was, so they agreed to take me and my husband back into their home. I told Murad, “I am leaving. Stay here if you wish.” Naturally, he did not stay. Let such a prize slip from his hands? Never. There was a small outbuilding in my parents' courtyard, and we settled there.

By then, through my father's intercession, I had been hired by the Ministry of Justice. A year later, our daughter Jennet was born. The name means “paradise.” When I chose it, I had the French name Jeannette in mind, but Murad opposed everything European, so I called her Jennet instead. Maternity leave lasted only one year and was unpaid. Murad studied and earned money.

He was handsome. Everyone in my family loved him. Women looked at him. He helped my relatives greatly and had authority. In those days, that was enough to arrange things: one person needed university admission, another needed a job. He helped organize weddings and sang free of charge when relatives needed him.

He was popular then, and his voice was like Pavarotti's—the famous Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti. For all this I thank Murad. He helped my relatives and enjoyed doing so. He also helped his own family, which was very large. He did it for a kind word, for a simple “thank you.” May the earth rest lightly upon him.

But alcohol was always beside him. Later, when he himself was in desperate need and required help, no one extended a hand—not his family, not mine. People say,

“Do good and cast it into the water; if the fish does not know, God will.” I believe that too.

My father's name was Ata, which means grandfather; it had been the name of his own grandfather. His grandfather was Tarkhan Bey, a participant in the Battle of Geok-Tepe in 1881, when General Skobelev launched the Geok-Tepe campaign. My mother's name was Enegul, meaning “mother-flower.” I was born in the village of Bagir in Ahal velayat. My mother and father fell in love, married secretly, and my mother went to live in my father's home.

Murad and I lived with my parents for about a year. Then we began looking for other accommodation, because my brothers started making life difficult for us and my mother also began to object. The three of us—Murad, our daughter Jennet, and I—moved into a flat near the Exhibition of Economic Achievements. We paid no rent because the owners were Murad's friends. We lived there for two or three years. Our son Mergen was born in that flat. The children were about a year and a half apart.

I spent one year on childcare leave. When Mergen turned one, I returned to the Ministry of Justice, to the department responsible for systematizing legislation and preparing draft laws.

By then Murad was also working in his profession. Yet his lack of discipline and disorganization took their toll. Out of envy, some friends spread false rumors to clients that he no longer sang, and all his customers disappeared.

Murad was a civil engineer by profession. His first assignment was to build a cattle farm. Later he worked in a carpentry shop with ordinary laborers. According to him, nothing moved unless he shouted at them. All the workers also liked to drink. There was nothing to be done, though they liked Murad.

Afterward he became director of a brick factory in Annau, but only for six months; he could not hold the position.

I liked my work at the Ministry of Justice. I was in my element, practicing my profession. I knew many lawyers from my student

years. We were preparing a book that consolidated legislation and often ran to the Mejlis, which had an enormous law library.

I was immersed in work, and at home there were the children. I thought of nothing else. I carried everything alone, complained to no one, and had no one to complain to. Murad, as always, drank, took no part in raising the children, and was terribly jealous.

The Supreme Court occupied the first floor of the ministry building, while the Ministry of Justice was on the second. We all knew and greeted one another. I do not wish to boast, but despite all my worries about the household, the children, my husband, and domestic work, I was probably still an interesting woman. Yet I never looked after myself. Everything was done in haste. I barely managed to feed the children breakfast and take them to kindergarten. No hairstyle, no face cream. It was an achievement merely to remain clean.

Murad needed looking after too. He liked good food, though I bought and carried home all the groceries myself. His mother, an old and sick woman, lived almost with us and also needed care. I quietly behaved like a robot and never thought of rebelling. Relatives constantly visited. For some of them, I even carried out a kind of charity work. All my family gathered at my home. I loved them all. Murad approved and never offended anyone or spoke a bad word to them.

Many employees of the Supreme Court looked at me closely. Naturally, it was pleasant, but nothing more.

Murad and I managed to buy one-third of a privately owned house, again in Khitrovka. The district still exists. It was emotionally difficult to live there, but what could we do? We needed a home. We borrowed money, used what savings we had, and my dear mother helped by selling some of my belongings at the flea market. That was a tremendous help. That is what a mother is. So our family moved back to Khitrovka.

At work I was offered a position as a trainee judge, and I accepted. By then, however, I had become pregnant with my third child. I considered an abortion but could not go through with it. I was afraid; it seemed dreadful to me. I was not thinking about sin. I loved God but was not devout. Religion was not encouraged in my parents' home; my father was a communist and Party member. And besides, there would have been another sin on my soul.

No other folk remedies helped. I had to keep the child.

My friend Bahar had also married and had children. We worked together in the Ministry of Justice. By then our relationship had cooled. She sought friendship with people whose parents held weight in society. Once I met her, and she told me that management had asked her about me —essentially, for a character reference. She said that I was principled. Principles are not always convenient, especially for management. It was interesting to hear my friend describe me that way. I had not expected it. I simply listened. During five years of friendship, she had never said anything like that to my face.

Murad began coming to my workplace. He waited outside, which was already a disadvantage for me as a future judge. I was visibly pregnant, and he began counting every minute I was delayed after work. He pestered me with questions about everything. It was awful. No one could have endured it. I was made of iron, but I was still a flower. I was pregnant with my youngest son, Meylis. I craved pomegranates, nuts, and peanuts. We ate lunch in the trade-union canteen at the civil-engineering institute.

One day I was sitting in the court office when Ashir suddenly came in. We greeted each other and talked. It turned out that he had married and had one daughter. He had no other children because one kidney had been removed. We spoke, and he left—as though forever. Another time, when I was walking with friends and he was with a companion, we passed without a word. Ashir worked in the security services. I asked nothing. Yes, I am a cold person. When he left my office, I did not even rise from my seat. I was heavily pregnant, so I remained seated.

At that time a secretary who lived in Mary sent me greetings from Janym. Perhaps he worked there. She told me about it with such excitement, but I had no time for him. I said “thank you,” coldly, and nothing more. I did not need unnecessary conversations. Murad was jealous enough already.

It became increasingly difficult for me to work in the court system. I could not sit still for long and listen through hearings.

My stomach constantly bloated and made loud noises. I was embarrassed. At home were the children and a jealous husband, and I received no help from anyone, not even relatives. I asked management to transfer me to the bar, and my request was granted.

For the sake of my family and children, I gave up such a prestigious post. There was not a trace of material ambition in me. People sometimes said, “You are a saint.” No, I am not a saint. I am simply made of iron. I would have made a good counterintelligence officer or surgeon.

I gradually settled into legal practice. I learned to open case files and deliver speeches—something I had lacked throughout my life. Everyone had always called me quiet. Well, here was the quiet woman speaking. They assigned me unpaid cases: matters in which a lawyer was required but the defendant could not pay. These involved murder, narcotics, and other serious crimes. Heavily pregnant, I went into prison to meet especially dangerous offenders.

Once there was a prison escape. The prisoners rammed a tractor through the wall. Many things happened—people were killed and wounded. Such was our work. When you entered the prison, the stench was so strong that you needed three days to wash it away. All one's clothes smelled of prison. The defendants came from different republics across the Soviet Union.

There were also duty days when we had to sit from morning until evening, receive clients on all kinds of matters, and write applications, claims, and other documents. I managed. We also had a financial quota: a certain amount from legal work had to be paid into the office's cash desk.

The staff was good. The chairman of the bar association lived near me in Khitrovka. He was a wealthy man and a former minister of internal affairs who had been removed from office for some reason. He had no biological children, only an adopted daughter and son from relatives. At that time Murad and I lived modestly, with our work and the house we had just bought. Murad worked in a carpentry shop in Annau. The chairman kept asking him to make doors and windows, though the chairman lived richly while we had three children and a newly purchased home. Our youngest son was born after we had moved

to Khitrovka. The chairman of the bar association met a tragic end. People said he shot himself. Horrible.

My nerves were constantly stretched. When Murad returned from weddings where he sang, he would search the wardrobes out of jealousy, imagining that I might be hiding a lover inside. I was exhausted, with three children—and supposedly a lover as well. Only a madwoman could have managed that. At home no one left me in peace, especially Murad. The many children of his eldest brother came to use our bathhouse and for other reasons. I was kind and quiet. I am still the same. People generally do not change; character remains as one's mother formed it. A person may become rich or poor, but the nature remains.

My parents lived near the Lenin District bar office, by the circus. I went to see them during breaks. Lawyers had irregular hours and could leave whenever they wished. No one asked where or why, as long as the quota was met—like taxi drivers.

My mother was always at home, and we talked for hours. At work, my colleagues—especially Madlena Tigranovna, an elderly woman—taught me to bake cakes. I am grateful to her. May she rest in heaven.

Life could be cheerful and interesting. Attractive, intelligent men offered me marriage, but by nature I love only once and remained faithful to my husband. I heard that our former classmates met once a year, perhaps more, near the Officers' House or in First Park. No one particularly searched for me or invited me. I knew why. I was a formidable rival. My mere presence spoiled the mood of many women, though I was quiet and inconspicuous. What frightened them? I did not seek their company either, though I could have. I had no time. They had annoyed me even during university, watching Janym and me constantly. What could I offer them now? I was thin and exhausted, with three children, while many of them looked fresh as cucumbers. Besides, Murad was fiercely jealous and would have tormented me endlessly. I became like Koschei the Deathless; nothing interested me anymore.

Later Janym reproached me for never attending class reunions. It turned out that he had waited intensely for me.

That was why they had not invited me. “Why did you never let me know anything about yourself?” Janym later wrote.

Meanwhile, my children grew. Both sons were red-haired and blue-eyed, like Europeans, because we are of a Euro-Mongoloid type. My daughter was dark, with large black, almost Arab eyes. My children were exceptionally beautiful.

Every year Murad and I took them to the Caspian Sea. We boarded the train at about eight in the evening and reached the shore by eight the next morning. The Caspian—the ancient Khazar Sea. In August the water was warm and the waves gentle. Often the waves rose high, and we all rode them. Beautiful. Sometimes we gathered shrimp. We traveled into town to buy provisions, especially sturgeon and smoked fish, and ate as much as we could. Seven or eight days each season were enough.

Once we went to the sea with relatives: my younger sister and her two children, my brother's wife and her two children, and a niece with her children. We took a tent and food. Powdered milk and buckwheat were especially useful. We had a great deal because Murad had obtained sacks of them from a warehouse, supposedly as repayment of debts, along with other products.

My sister and niece bought children's inflatable rings in town. At the beach, my sister—already a large, grown woman—sat on a child's ring and threw herself into the sea. The current carried her farther and farther out. She could barely swim and only splashed. Suddenly people shouted that she was being swept away. They ran to me. I plunged into the sea in a long house dress. I swam dog-paddle and not very well. I reached her and the ring, then pushed her toward shore with one hand. I barely managed and almost drowned myself. Eventually other people arrived and extended a pole to her.

There was no “thank you.” On the contrary, she later said she could swim a little herself. In other countries, people like me receive medals; I received a slap in the face. I promised myself never again to go to the sea with relatives. We returned home deeply tanned, almost black.

Meanwhile, Murad built an excellent annex. It contained a bathhouse, a toilet connected to sewerage, and a comfortable kitchen with a gas stove and hot water.

One New Year, I bought an artificial plastic Christmas tree. Such trees were fashionable then, and real fir trees were almost unavailable. It was tall, beautiful, perhaps two meters or more, and wonderfully full. None of our relatives had such a beauty. I love New Year: the laid table, Father Frost, the Snow Maiden, and children. Everyone else pulled old trees and ornaments from trunks, while ours was brand new. We set it on a stand, covered the base with cotton wool, and sprinkled the cotton with glitter.

As usual, I left for work at the bar office. The children remained home alone, probably because it was the school holiday. When I returned, I could not understand what I saw: the tree was gone. Only black metal rods remained. My eyes darted around. We had just renovated the room before buying the tree. Murad, then head of a carpentry shop, had lined the walls with wooden slats and scorched them decoratively. That was fashionable, like a steam bath, and considered the height of style.

It turned out that my eldest son had fired a party popper directly into the cotton at the tree's base, and the plastic ignited. No adults were home. My daughter was still a small schoolgirl, but she took charge. The children brought water from the kitchen, and she beat at the flames with a broom until they extinguished them. Perhaps God helped. It could have become a true fire. The entire large house, divided among three households, might have burned down.

Lord, the most important thing was my children. Thank you, God, for protecting my children and the neighbors' children. I was in shock. Yes, Murad and I can be judged for leaving them. That was our life. When Murad came home, I told him everything. As always, he remained calm.

Murad bought me whatever I needed or wanted. I remember that he bought me diamond earrings. None of my acquaintances or relatives had such earrings then. They did not even understand what they were; glass would have meant the same to them. I understood, because my friends were Armenian. I was not mercenary,

but they persuaded me to appreciate such things. They knew their value.

When my daughter was about six and a half, I persuaded Murad to let me take her to Leningrad. It was my dream. He was working and could not come, so he agreed to remain with our two sons. They attended kindergarten, and one of the caregivers agreed to help look after them. It was my first journey beyond my native republic.

My nephew studied in Leningrad. He had graduated and was pursuing postgraduate study. He gave me an address, but happened to leave for home during the holidays. The flat where he rented a room would supposedly be empty. The landlady sometimes came, though she had a dacha. To tell the truth, I was traveling into uncertainty, like visiting a grandmother in an unknown village. My nephew and I had not made clear arrangements. My sister—his mother—gave me the address.

We flew on an Il-18, then took a taxi. When we arrived, no one opened the door. My daughter and I sat on the floor outside for several hours. There were no mobile phones. Eventually I decided to explore the building, which was near the Moskovskiye Vorota station. My daughter and I looked like gypsies; she was dark with enormous eyes, so people might easily have thought so.

On the ground floor, I saw an open door and an elderly woman sitting inside. We began talking. She was something like a linen-room attendant. She immediately liked us. She offered to take us to her own home if my nephew did not appear and said she had enough space. We relaxed.

We walked around the city and happened to enter the Obraztsov Puppet Theatre. We had brought melons and treated her to one. By evening the apartment door finally opened. To this day, I do not know why my nephew had not opened it. When we asked, he said he had been home, though we had rung and knocked. The question remains. He greeted us happily. The landlady also arrived and was pleased, although she had not known we were coming. She was cultured, intelligent, and modest. That is what Leningrad people were like. To me, they were

noble people. They had endured the wartime blockade and suffered terribly. Asians had helped many of them during those years. Her adult son lived nearby with his wife.

For me, Moscow and Leningrad alike were part of my Motherland. That was how we had been taught in school: Moscow was the capital of our Motherland. My nephew left for Turkmenistan during the holidays, and the landlady went to her dacha. My daughter and I remained alone.

It was July, the season of white nights. We drew the curtains to make the room dark. In the morning we went downstairs to a nearby café for breakfast: delicious éclairs and coffee with milk. Once a waitress asked permission to take my daughter by the hand. She walked her down the long café corridor past many coffee counters, showing her to the staff and saying, “Look at her huge eyes and curly hair.” We were like exhibits. We took it calmly; we had grown accustomed to everything. There was nothing remarkable to us, but to them we were exotic.

Gradually we became confident. We visited museums and the Hermitage; Lenin-related sites such as the hut and the Gulf of Finland; Peterhof, the Catherine Palace, Pushkin's Lyceum, GUM, TsUM, and Vasilyevsky Island. We traveled by boat on the Neva. A colleague from the Ministry of Justice named Lyuda had warned me that life in Leningrad and Moscow moved so quickly that I would be unable to manage there. Thank God, I found everything and oriented myself better than the locals, like a fish in water.

One day we went shopping with a map in hand, getting off at the right station. I entered a shop and told my daughter to wait outside for five minutes while I looked at costume jewelry. I knew she would wait. Though small, she was obedient and clever. I came out quickly—and she was gone. I looked in every direction, stunned, unable to think. Then I walked forward, scanning the street, and to my great relief saw her coming toward me. I could breathe again. Merciful God. She looked as though she came from another planet; anyone could have abducted her. I must have been out of my mind to leave a small girl alone in a crowd. Lord, forgive and protect us.

I asked, “What did you do? I told you to wait and not go anywhere.” She replied,

“I saw a woman who looked like you and followed her. I thought it was you.” Thus God saved us from a great disaster. I had lost my vigilance. Terrible.

The next day my daughter and I went to Vasilyevsky Island, where the passenger boats were. It was the first time we had boarded such a vessel, though there had been small boats on the Caspian. I was afraid to get on. We tried Pepsi-Cola and Fanta. For some reason, the Neva looked dark and frightening to me.

We bought many things, packed a parcel, and sent it home to my mother from the post office near Kazan Cathedral, which was under renovation. The parcel contained Teatralnye candies and barberry sweets. My mother loved them, and I had bought them for her.

My daughter and I waited in line to enter the Hermitage. It was mysterious and fascinating. “In the Greek Hall, in the Greek Hall,” as the great comedian Arkady Raikin used to say. We spent about twenty days in Leningrad. I could tell much more.

At last we decided to return home. We bought plane tickets, arrived, and ordinary life resumed. The trip had been wonderful, but once we returned, no one was interested in how we had spent our time in Leningrad.

My daughter was due to enter first grade. I decided to place her in a Russian school, although she had grown up in Khitrovka among the local population, where no one spoke Russian. Because I was registered at my parents' address and worked nearby, I enrolled her in School No. 3 near their home.

Every morning before seven, she traveled alone from Khitrovka by bus to Freedom Avenue, transferred to a trolleybus to Second Park, and then walked to school. Sometimes she was late, and the journey became increasingly difficult. Her teacher imposed excessive demands, persistently asked where her father worked, and summoned us to school. Murad built an awning over her windows, as she requested, but the persecution continued.

After first grade, Jennet no longer wanted to remain there, and it had become hard for us too. I moved her to a national school near our home, and later to a more

prestigious school, where she studied for eight years. After completing eighth grade, she entered medical college.

In Khitrovka I felt like Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island. One neighboring family consisted almost entirely of drug addicts—the mother, father, and daughter. Only their son was not addicted, though he was involved in other dirty affairs. Despite his condition, the father still taught in the lower grades of a school.

Another neighbor was a Tatar woman who lived alone with a German shepherd. She was malicious and quarrelsome, constantly finding fault with us. As always, I was quiet and polite and did not answer. She grew bolder and behaved as she pleased. I had a friend there, an elderly woman, and complained to her. She advised me to swear at the neighbor. Everyone knew obscene language in Soviet times, especially me. The next time the woman began her old song, I cursed her thoroughly. She almost fainted, never expecting it from me. Still waters run deep. After that, she left us alone.

I began to worry about my children's future and wanted to move from that district toward the city center as quickly as possible. Murad was kindhearted and calm, so all his relatives respected and loved him. He could give away all our property. By the standards of the time, we lived well. Both my family and his visited often.

Soon we found a house near my parents and my workplace. We needed a buyer for the Khitrovka property. One appeared: people who had moved from another republic. The house was sold. At first they tried to take our belongings with the house, but later regretted the attempt. They did not succeed.

Murad was respected in many circles. He had earned this through his voice and his singing at weddings. An uncle who held senior positions helped him and lent us money. I am deeply grateful. May he rest in peace and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. He was a good man. As soon as the house was sold, we repaid him. He and his mother respected me greatly, including as a lawyer. At one time I helped his elderly

mother restore her survivor's pension. Her husband had died at the front in the war against the fascist invaders. I helped her with other legal matters as well.

Murad's uncle was angry that Murad often came to work intoxicated; naturally, the rumors reached him. Murad behaved disgracefully, without limit. I understand that many people drink, but he seemed to go wild from having too easy a life. It was sheer lawlessness. People constantly brought him home drunk and left him right in the yard. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I took the children and went to relatives who lived nearby. What else could I do? There was no way back. My parents had enough worries of their own; we were an extra burden. When I told Murad's relatives, they would come gladly and hold a celebration around him.

By the time my eldest son turned two, my father was already gone. He died of high blood pressure at the age of seventy-two. Murad went unpunished, yet whenever he sobered up he was the best man in the world. When drunk, he did not bother anyone; he slept and shouted in his sleep. Perhaps it was delirium tremens.

I myself, of course, had no desire for intimacy. I do not know why. Perhaps I really was frigid —that is, a woman who does not want intimacy. I was exhausted by family life, thin and unkempt, and went to work however I happened to look. In short, I was hardly a beauty. Yet the most respectable men paid attention to me. I never thought of anything “bad,” and had no time even to consider flirting. Some of the young women at work came up to me in envy, while I did not even know what to answer. I had no wish to explain why so many men liked me.

After selling the house, we bought one not far from the circus. My parents lived nearby, and the bar association was close as well. My eldest son, Mergen, had already entered fifth grade. He studied well in a Russian school and himself looked Russian—blue eyes and fair skin. When the teacher called him to the board, he walked up quietly and diligently. But after receiving a mark of “5,” he would strike every pupil he passed on his way back to his desk. Everyone at school was afraid of him. He was an extremely combative, hyperactive child. In the new neighborhood and new school he became something of a “boss,” defending bullied pupils like Robin Hood. He carried whole kilograms of rice out of the house and distributed it to

his “subjects” so they could shoot grains through empty ballpoint-pen tubes.

His homeroom teacher summoned me constantly. “He would be better off giving that rice to me,” she said. “People cannot afford to buy rice, while he sprays it through tubes and teaches the other children to do the same—every single day.” He beat one boy so badly that an ambulance was called. The boy's mother later came to our house, and I wanted the ground to swallow me. Then another man arrived, saying Mergen had taken his son's bicycle. Fortunately, it was found. And so it went on without end.

By that age Mergen had everything: several bicycles, a tape recorder he used, and much more. What he lacked was a good example from his father, Murad, who came home drunk almost every day. As boys grow older, they look to their father; he becomes their model. A mother is no longer the same authority. From an early age I enrolled Mergen in football and boxing. He broke the same arm twice. He studied reasonably well. But a child's hyperactivity leads to nothing good, and little can be done except impose the strictest supervision—something I could not provide. At home, however, Mergen helped me with the housework and was an obedient boy.

One summer I was offered a last-minute voucher to a holiday home in the Ryazan region, in a place called Sosnovy Bor. It was near the birthplace of Yesenin, the famous romantic lyric poet. Our whole family flew to Russia for a month: first to Moscow, then by commuter train to Ryazan and onward to Sosnovy Bor. It was the first time we had taken a family holiday in Russia.

The children saw a forest and a powerful thunderstorm. I remember how frightened we were, because we had never witnessed such a storm before. I remember the Oka River and our trip on a motorboat. We rowed on the river, gathered mushrooms in the forest, and visited historic places, monuments of ancient Rus', and churches. I made Murad promise not to drink while we were at the holiday home. He kept his word.

Afterward we returned to Moscow, found a flat, and walked around the city—GUM, TsUM, VDNKh, and Red Square, the most frequently visited places. The children saw the metro for the first time. We returned home by train because, with the school year about to begin, there were no plane tickets: everyone was traveling home, many by air. We bought the children clothes and a heap of toys. The impressions were unforgettable.

Then the school year began—and once again, Mergen!

I forgot to tell you something else about my children. All three of them went missing at one time or another when they were small. After I left Jennet with her kindergarten teacher, she somehow walked out of the kindergarten by herself—she was about three—and followed after me, trying to find me. Kind people found her and telephoned the police station. The teacher was terrified; she was at fault. Thank God, by His help, it ended safely.

Exactly the same thing happened with Mergen: he walked out of kindergarten and everyone searched for him. And Meylis, my youngest son, when he was perhaps three or a little older, ran off to play with the other children, his brother and sister, fell behind, and became lost. Murad and I barely managed to find him. We went from house to house and finally discovered him with Russian neighbors nearby. They had assumed he was a Russian boy crying because he was lost, and had kept him safe until his parents appeared. We were deeply grateful to them.

Enough of that. Back to Mergen. Even after seeing the wider world and having a good rest, he did not calm down. I could not understand it, because when he was beside me he was obedient, caring, and hardworking. He helped around the house, swept the yard, washed clothes in the washing machine and hung them out. He bathed by himself, took photographs, and developed them. As I have said, Mergen was born hyperactive. A mother always senses her child. His activity frightened me and put me on guard. My nerves were already worn thin.

In our new neighborhood he became involved with friends we did not know. They worked at the shooting gallery near the circus and were older than he was. A shooting gallery was a shooting gallery; work was work. To this day I do not know who those people really were. And so his new adventures began.

There had been plenty of trouble back in Khitrovka too—more than I could ever recount. In short, from the very beginning he was my constant headache.

He studied well, almost entirely at the highest level. As I have already said, from the age of seven he played football and boxed, broke his arm twice, and was once badly burned, leaving a scar. Even when very young he could find his way along bus routes. What else was possible? I always worked and had no one to help me. Once he almost disappeared after boarding the wrong bus.

Meanwhile I had my job and the household. Every day I had to go to the market for food and carry back tens of kilograms. That burden remained with me for life. For a time we even owned a car, but it was never available to me. Under such conditions, of course, a woman develops heart trouble. All the while Murad was enjoying himself, indifferent to the children and the family. It was always that way.

He was building a house for his friend Babadjan. That friend had enormous influence over him. Murad idolized him and obeyed him in everything, fed him, and constantly brought him to our home. Babadjan, naturally, did not acknowledge me. Murad used our Zhiguli car to bring soldiers to work on Babadjan's house. He could make arrangements with the commander of a military unit because he had friends there. He did not care about us, but built his friend a two-story house.

Babadjan taught physical education at a university and kept Murad firmly under his control. He was handsome and tall, rather like the Indian film actor Raj Kapoor. He took advantage of Murad's kindness. Long before, Murad had been his pupil in physical education at school. I still sometimes see the two of them together in my dreams. Can you imagine how hard all this was for me, both morally and physically?

One night the windows facing the street were open. I seemed to be asleep, yet I was still waiting for Murad. When would he come home? I left the street door unlocked so that no one would knock in the middle of the night and wake the children. Then I heard Babadjan say to him, “Do not listen to your wife. I am not afraid of her.” Murad seemed hypnotized; he loved that man more than life itself, more than his own children. Their friendship had begun before I came into Murad's life. Babadjan, being older and his former teacher, used him for his own purposes.

Nor was Babadjan the only one who exploited Murad for the sake of himself and his four children. Pestimeya, whom I have already mentioned, did the same. Murad obeyed her without a word.

Her word was law to Murad. This probably went back to his childhood, when Pestimeya came into their home as a bride. Murad was small then, much younger than his eldest brother. His father was imprisoned as an “enemy of the people,” in the Gulag in Siberia. Murad never spoke tenderly to our children, yet he constantly addressed Pestimeya's children with warm words such as “balam” and “janym.”

Murad did not know how his children were doing at school. Not once did he check their report diaries. He did not even know which schools they attended. Perhaps that was how he himself had been raised. Besides everything else, I had to supervise the children's lessons. Russian schools imposed strict responsibility, unlike the national schools, where the main thing was simply to attend. How well you learned was of little concern to anyone.

Meylis, my youngest son, spent two years in a Russian school, and even that was considered a long time. I gave his teacher expensive presents. Such teachers can smell whom they can skin alive. But when you live among wolves, you must howl like a wolf. These were skills we had to learn—skills our parents had never taught us. They had raised us to be cultured, honest, and modest, and nothing more.

Meylis's teacher began demanding more and more from me. In practice, that meant giving him marks of “2” and “3.” She awarded a “3” only when she received a gift; otherwise she kept him after class. My son was careless about school, so I decided to transfer him to a Turkmen school. Whatever happened would happen. It was difficult for me to overcome all this alone. There they simply promoted pupils from one grade to the next.

Meanwhile, at work, Murad's relatives asked me to represent them as a lawyer. The man who approached me worked at the post office, receiving parcels addressed poste restante. Some of the parcels turned out to contain cannabis. Cannabis was considered a narcotic, and drug cases were treated as serious crimes. I did not want to become involved with relatives and handed the case to a colleague, a pensioner and disabled war veteran. He had suffered a concussion in the war and was regarded at work as an informer. I got along very well with him and did not put much faith in gossip.

One day I was summoned to the personnel department of the Ministry of Justice. Suspecting nothing, I went in.

They announced that an anonymous letter had been written against me, alleging that I was involved in the drug case. The head of personnel had once worked in the state-security organs and had retired with a pension. He said the anonymous letter had been sent directly to those organs. I was stunned, but he began pressuring me.

I was not frightened. First, I demanded to see the letter and to know its author. Second, I demanded evidence. Third, I warned that if the authorities acted unlawfully, I would complain to the Office of the Prosecutor General in Moscow. With that, the anonymous accusation was closed. My nerves were at breaking point and had to recover. The whole affair had been the invention of an anonymous informer—the shell-shocked man.

That summer Murad and I decided to rest and spend a month in the Baltic region. We left the children with my mother. Of course, we provided food, although looking back now I think it was still not enough.

First Murad and I flew to Moscow, then took a train to Riga, and from Riga a commuter train to Jurmala. There was a place in Jurmala, I think, called Majori—or perhaps Maira—where we found a flat. Murad promised not to drink, and he kept that promise until the end of our journey.

Every day we took the commuter train to Riga, went to shops and the market. I especially liked the pickled cucumbers and strawberries. The Baltic Sea seemed calm to me. Holidaymakers lay on the beach almost all day to get a tan. Of course, it was not the Caspian Sea. The Caspian is true beauty. Our landlady allowed us to drink blueberry juice and to pick and eat strawberries from the garden.

What I disliked was the toilet, which stood almost inside the house, attached to it. There was no sewerage. The flies were huge, unlike our small ones.

We went into the forest to gather blueberries, wearing rubber boots. In Riga I wanted to attend an organ concert, but Murad was too lazy, so we did not go. The first time we boarded the commuter train from Jurmala to Riga, we were fined. It turned out that we should have bought tickets at the station, but we did not know. Ignorance is no excuse under the law, and so we were caught.

From Riga we traveled first to Estonia, to Tallinn, and then to Lithuania, to Vilnius. I liked Tallinn most of all, probably because of its atmosphere. Everything there interested me—the museums, towers, shops, people, streets, and the rough, imposing sea. It was beautiful. We shopped in Tallinn, and still have photographs of our children wearing clothes we bought there.

We walked around Vilnius a little as well. We wanted to visit Trakai, a castle on a small island, but arrived on its day off. Then we returned to Riga and Jurmala. The Baltic weather felt cool to us because we were accustomed to summer heat. I liked the ice cream: it was enormous and delicious. Everything was interesting. The people were simple Europeans. At the time I marveled at the luxurious summer houses in Jurmala; back home people were not permitted to build two-story dachas. Altogether, we stayed twenty days.

On our way home we first flew from Riga and stopped in Astrakhan, then continued to Turkmenistan. The children did not recognize us. Murad had grown a moustache, and I was wearing trousers, which I had never worn before. Nor did we recognize our children at first. They had become quiet and obedient. They had always been that way, in principle, but now they were like little rabbits.

Mergen, it turned out, had gone without permission to a public telephone and called us, dialing numbers at random. He said he had got through and spoken with us—and indeed, we had spoken to him. The children had missed us terribly. Then ordinary life resumed as before.

My daughter entered medical college through connections and payment. At that time nearly everyone entered that way after eighth grade. She completed the college and received her diploma. She worked continuously in hospitals such as the Red Cross and the Niyazov Hospital, in therapy and neurosurgery departments. Later new centers and large clinics opened, including the Nephrology Center. She eventually became a senior nurse there.

An order came from above that experienced nurses with many years of service were to be admitted to medical institute without competition. Jennet was placed on the list. Then they performed what one might call a knight's move: although her name was included, she was refused admission, supposedly because she had not passed the competition—even though the order had come from the very top.

In her place they admitted a girl with no work experience at all. Jennet was discriminated against there too. Injustice of this kind left her with nothing to hold her in the country. She decided to see the world and prove herself. Nothing bound her; she wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

She had married young. Her husband was tall and handsome, university-educated, and from an intellectual family. They had a magnificent wedding. But his beauty was only a shell; inside, everything was rotten like a spoiled egg. She fell deeply in love with him and would not even allow us to accept gifts from his family. I told her that he was not suited to her and that something was wrong with his mind, but she would not listen.

It turned out that he was already becoming an alcoholic. They had a son. Her husband began to drink openly, use drugs, and steal her gold jewelry. When their son turned three, she divorced him. I looked after her child—my grandson—taking him to kindergarten and collecting baby food for him from the children's dairy kitchen. At that time infants up to one year old received food free of charge, and that helped save us to some extent. My daughter continued working in clinics. Somehow, little by little, we survived.

Those years were extremely difficult. Even after finding work in a new city clinic equipped entirely with German technology, she felt lonely and unwanted. She was only in her twenties—young, beautiful, and unhappy.

These were the 1990s, when life was hard for everyone and twice as hard for her. She made a desperate decision. Many people were leaving the country then, and she decided to do the same. We found some female relatives who were going abroad, and she joined them. Some left for America, others for England or Russia. Jennet chose England. It was easier to leave in those days. She could not obtain permission for America, although going there was considered the most prestigious option. Everyone did what they could.

She obtained a six-month tourist visa at the British embassy. They asked her what famous sights England had. She replied, “Bon Big,” reversing “Big Ben.” The adviser laughed—and gave her the visa. She was lucky.

She remained in England for about two or three years and learned to see the world with different eyes. She knew English from the school curriculum and learned Turkish there as well. Turkmen and

Turkish are very similar. She worked in a café owned by Turks. Her stay in England was unlawful, but no one challenged her or issued a deportation order. She sent me money and parcels from there. We were in great need at the time.

Then she returned home and remained for about a year, finding a good job. After that she left again, this time for Cyprus. There she married a Cypriot laborer and gave birth to a son, whom they named Murad after his grandfather.

Meanwhile my son Mergen, who had been exceptionally active since childhood, was performing limitless “miracles.” At school he acquired new friends who brought cannabis to class. Because of that conduct, he was registered with the juvenile division of the police. The 1990s were a time of horror and lawlessness.

We transferred him to a Turkmen school. For a while he lived with relatives. After he finished school, we placed him in the Polytechnic Institute, in its most prestigious oil-and-gas faculty. In his first year he began misbehaving. He sprayed all the students with gas from a canister and was expelled. With Murad's help he was reinstated, because the institute rector was his uncle. By then, however, he already had a criminal conviction, and for that reason he was expelled again.

His first conviction came before he was sixteen, so he was treated as a juvenile. He beat an acquaintance and then entered the young man's flat, looking for something. He took a bag containing documents but later threw it away; afterward the bag could not be found. Murad and I went to everyone we knew for help, but those very acquaintances demanded a substantial sum from us to prevent him from receiving a prison sentence. We were prepared to do anything.

Yet he did not stop. He liked that kind of life. No one and nothing could persuade him otherwise, because materially he had everything. He also continued in sports. What else did he need? Imagine how much more I still had to endure. I would not wish it on anyone. I bore it all in silence and complained to no one. No one cared about me. Murad was not especially concerned; he drank and remembered nothing. The court gave Mergen a suspended sentence, as the law required for a first offense committed by a minor.

I wanted the earth to swallow me from shame. Gray hairs appeared on my head. Yet those were only the blossoms; the berries came later. I no longer wanted to work, but what choice did I have?

Still not calmed, Mergen befriended young men from neighboring apartment blocks. By then we lived in a multi-story building, in a flat I had received through my workplace. The young men were sons of ministers and other respected people. It turned out that they used powerful narcotics and visited various drug dens. In the 1990s the borders with neighboring states opened, and drugs began to be brought in. We had not known such things before.

The den was eventually shut down, and many people came under investigation. There were six young men, and all were arrested. Our home was searched. Fortunately, I had managed to empty Mergen's pockets and flush something down the toilet. No physical evidence was found against him, and he was not caught in any specific act. There was, as they say, no evidentiary basis. At that time everyone was imprisoned indiscriminately, guilty and innocent alike. It was complete lawlessness. I do not excuse my son, but there was no evidence.

One of the fathers in the group was a minister. He filed a complaint against Mergen and demanded that the investigators charge him. It was solely for that reason that Mergen was brought to trial. I did not attend; Murad went. At home I nearly lost my mind. Such shame. In the end I had become like a robot. I could no longer tell what was shameful and what was not. I simply drifted with the current.

For two years I traveled alone to visit my son in prison in Bayram-Ali, carrying heavy bags in foul-smelling railway carriages. He wrote letters from there and sent lists of everything we were to buy him. You would not believe it—it was enough to fill an entire warehouse. We felt sorry for him. What could we do? He was our son; we could not renounce him.

He found us wherever we were. During all the years of his misconduct, our family was reduced almost to poverty. He stole my gold jewelry, of which I had once owned a great deal, as well as our Teke carpets. We sold the house. Whenever we were away, he carried off all our possessions. He telephoned advertisements, and they

would come and buy all our property for a pittance. This happened many times.

During that period he managed to leave for Russia with his girlfriend. She was Russian, and her whole family was moving there. We too obtained migrant status because everyone else was doing so, though we did not actually leave. Mergen was the exception.

After two years in Russia, Mergen married. Then, to our misfortune, he came back. We had thought we were finally rid of him, but it was not to be. His life in Russia had not worked out. He and his wife spent the money he had taken from the sale of his own house. Once the money was gone, no one needed him there. His wife's family threw him out because there was too little room; they themselves could barely make ends meet. He became homeless, eating and sleeping wherever he could, searching rubbish bins, and only just managed to escape from that life and return.

For the third time he was caught stealing. He did not remain in prison long, because amnesties were frequent. As I have said, large quantities of drugs were coming in from neighboring countries, and young people were eager to try everything. Those were dreadful days. Every month Murad and I sent him parcels, taking money away from the needs of the family. Life was hard for us too. We thought his adventures were finally over. But alas—no. After selling all our property, we were left with nothing. He reduced us to beggary.

At last Murad could bear no more and submitted an application for Mergen to be sent to an LTP, a compulsory labor-and-treatment institution. There they taught him a severe lesson. He wept and begged us to take him away; he had no strength left. Once again we pitied him. Only after he had left us destitute and cast us into the street did he perhaps begin to understand.

He found employment. He held driving licenses for every category of vehicle. To his credit, he achieved things through his own persistence, but he was quickly dismissed because of his dreadful temper.

He also found live-in partners very easily—women much like himself, or girls who imagined he had influential parents and hoped to gain a flat, residence registration, or something similar from him. After a while he found a woman much older than he was. She had a flat and an adult daughter. And then

he fell in love with her daughter.

Their flat was in a disgraceful state, as if alcoholics lived there. After staying for some time, Mergen demanded that we renovate “his” flat at our expense. Murad brought building materials. We bought them a refrigerator and a gas stove, and restored their home telephone—no easy matter in those days. Mergen found another job. In other words, he exploited us again as much as he could. In the end they kicked him out. The police had been called there more than once. And so he returned to us.

Murad and I lived under constant nervous strain. Because of Mergen, my heart became so bad that we had to call an ambulance. I suffered a mild heart attack, while Murad began drinking even more. He went to work drunk or half-drunk. Sometimes my youngest son had to substitute for him.

Mergen returned to live with me in my daughter's flat, where I was staying with my grandson Dovlet. There too he fought with the neighbors. Again there were police visits and endless fines. All our wages and pensions disappeared into them, yet he still did not understand. Then his illnesses began—tuberculosis, sinusitis, hepatitis. Money had to be found for all of it. I began selling my gold jewelry. Once I too had valuables, but all of them went on his drugs. Car accidents occurred constantly, and the victims came to our home.

Yes, I needed an iron heart to endure all this—and a bucket filled with tears. I was proud as well and complained to no one. Others also had hardships of their own. In short, as the saying goes, it cannot be told in a fairy tale or described by any pen.

But better days eventually came. Mergen gradually settled down. He met a woman, and they began living together. Later they officially married. They have now lived together for about ten years, although they have no children. Mergen gave up drugs and alcohol. His wife taught him prayers, and he began to pray. Glory be to God: to this day he has not stopped reciting them. It is true that at times he lashes out at everyone with complaints and dissatisfaction and lectures us on how to live. Still, I hope he has come to God, and that God protects him.

Those terrible years finally passed out of our lives. Little by little, I too became an iron lady—an iron flower.

My youngest son, Meylis, is tall and handsome, with blue eyes. After school he entered music college. When he graduated, he entered the conservatory to study voice. He married and has two beautiful daughters. To us, they are princesses.

And now we come close to my reunion with Janym. It took place through the social network Odnoklassniki. It was spring 2022, probably March. I had nothing to do and felt a little bored. My grandson Dovlet had gone to his mother in Cyprus after serving two years in the border troops in Dashoguz. During those two years I traveled to see him every other month; it was an enormous support to him.

In Cyprus he entered a private institute to study architecture, with God's help. His mother provided most of the financial support. Four years later he graduated with honors. He had talent and loved technical drawing. His studies were in English, and he mastered Turkish as well. In short, he did very well and quickly found work.

My daughter loves me deeply and is also very obedient and attentive. She searched Odnoklassniki—often shortened to OK. Using his surname and first name, she found my Janym. His page contained family photographs of those dear to him.

Jennet then posted a photograph of me as a young university student. Fifty years had passed since that time.

I am a quiet person—that was what everyone used to call me—cautious, and perhaps simply well-mannered. There are few such people now. Suddenly a reply arrived. As I have said, my daughter lives in Cyprus and has internet access, a computer, and a mobile telephone. Here, because I did not have the Odnoklassniki application—some people did, but new accounts could no longer be opened—and because the pandemic prevented me from traveling to Jennet in Cyprus, I communicated with her only by mobile phone.

Thus Janym and I began corresponding through OK. When he saw my photograph as a student, he wrote that old feelings had stirred within him. At first he approached from a distance, apologizing and saying he was glad to greet the daughter of his former classmate. He asked that, if possible, I write about all our university friends—who was alive and who had passed away—and send them his greetings if I met them.

Jennet told him that her mother used the IMO social network and that, if he wished, he could speak with me there. Janym wrote directly to my telephone number: “Hello. I do not have access to IMO and can communicate only through Odnoklassniki or Skype.” He also asked me to open my own OK page and sent heartfelt thanks to my daughter for making our communication possible.

First he told me about himself and his children. He has three: two daughters and a son. Like mine, they are all grown. For some reason he did not want to say much about his eldest daughter. Apparently she graduated from medical institute but did not work in her profession; beyond that he said nothing, and I am not inquisitive.

His son graduated from the law faculty of a university while they were still living in our country. Only afterward did they move to Russia, as so many people were doing—especially since his wife was Russian. His younger daughter also became a lawyer and worked in court.

As I understood it, he felt a powerful nostalgia for his homeland, though he did not speak openly about it. One of our former classmates visited him in Leningrad and later told us how deeply he missed home and had even shed tears. Those were dreadful years, when the Soviet Union collapsed and everyone searched for something else, hoping for a life even better than the one we had once known. Perhaps I too would have wanted to leave somewhere, had it not been for my family and children.

Janym wanted to know everything about our classmates—who still lived and who had gone to another world. I wrote whatever I knew. I found one female classmate who had photographs of our group and knew all the news because she had organized every reunion. Yet she had not really looked for me. I guessed why: many girls had liked my Janym, and they did not need a rival. But that is beside the point.

I had missed reunions not only because no one told me, but because my husband was intensely jealous and also drank. What would have happened at such gatherings was obvious. My friend Bahar also became proud and stopped communicating with me. She too rarely attended.

I have another classmate, Sonya. Sometimes we met in town or went together to collect our pensions. Once she hinted that at one reunion Janym had sat beside her and held her hand. When I told Janym, he answered, “She should not mistake wishful thinking for reality.” Learning all this after so many years was rather amusing. When I asked Sonya, “Was he a womanizer, then?” she became agitated and could not answer.

Janym and I had never owed each other anything. On the rare occasions we met, we did not have long conversations; we were simply happy and lived by feeling alone. It was love for one another, yet even about that we remained silent. Sometimes we merely looked into each other's eyes and said nothing—nothing at all.

Janym began remembering the past. He admitted that what had existed between us in our student years had been entirely sincere, and he accused me of having a hard character. In his words I felt his love for me and the long wait he had endured in hope of seeing me again.

I had loved him too, but that love was hidden deep inside my heart, very far away. I had been afraid to reveal it and had pushed both the feeling and the thought of it away. Janym complained about his own life: thirty years had passed since he moved away; he had already been retired for sixteen years; he missed his homeland and his friends; and he was constantly occupied with family worries. The climate there was cold, and they had to heat the house with firewood like primitive people.

I remained somewhat rigid in my principles; perhaps the grievances of years gone by still affected me. But he understood that I still loved him.

It turned out that Janym had suffered two heart attacks and undergone coronary bypass surgery. I was not especially surprised, because at our age many classmates were no longer alive. I too had heart trouble of a similar kind, high blood pressure, and damage to the facial nerve. A swelling had appeared on my left hand, so I constantly wore scarves to conceal the lump.

Still, from the outside everything appeared wonderful: an elderly woman walking and dancing. Everything was fine. I have always been an optimist. I never complain about anyone and do not hold grudges.

I had spent my whole life in motion, both at home and in public service: caring for the house, the children, and my husband; cooking, washing, cleaning, going to work, and so on. In short, I was a robot. Old age, after all, is no joy.

Janym called himself “Babay,” an old man or bogeyman, because when his grandson saw him in a long sheepskin coat, he thought his grandfather looked like a babay. That gave me a reason to call him “Babay” too.

I sent him family photographs. He was astonished to see me. In his words, I had blossomed, and my children and grandchildren were beautiful and wonderful. He also offered condolences for the death of my husband Murad, although more than ten years had passed.

I became increasingly accustomed to Janym. The old longing and love, the desire to see him every day, revived again and again. As before, I began to miss him painfully. I would think: this is the final message; I shall close the subject and return to ordinary life. But I could not.

He was a decent, disciplined man, raised in a Jewish family, a retired colonel of the Prosecutor General's Office, and a Virgo by zodiac sign. He felt ashamed that our correspondence passed through my daughter Jennet. Janym wrote that it was very difficult for him to continue because he felt extremely awkward. Our messages were going through Jennet, and this seemed to him not entirely ethical.

He continued: she understood everything, yet by laying bare our feelings and mourning emotionally for a past that could never return, we were involuntarily disturbing the memory of her father. I thought he might at least have written “revealing” our feelings instead of “laying them bare.” He had become quite a writer. His sharp phrasing made me want to end the correspondence, but he begged me not to. He did not want to leave me, even if all we had was written communication.

He himself did not appear on camera and, for some reason, did not send photographs later either. I could not explain this, though naturally I did not insist.

He sent me Yuri Voronov's poem “They Were Killing Love—Killing It with Four Hands.” It contains lines to this effect:

“They were killing love. And one day love died. Yet secretly from one another, those same four hands still water flowers on the grave of the love they killed.”

Janym was amazed that I had such a kind daughter. He said Jennet worshiped me and therefore forgave me everything, unable to voice her own opinion. What a righteous man he had become. He began to feel sorry for my daughter and said he was shocked by her goodness. I very much hoped his judgment of the situation was mistaken.

Our correspondence was a secret from his family—his wife and children. I concealed nothing; I had no secrets from my children, and Murad had been dead for many years.

Janym wrote that I had once called him provincial. Perhaps that was true and an accurate description. “But more likely,” he said, “I was a coward. I became frightened. As for my feelings for you, you know... there is no deceit here. I saw your photograph, and everything stirred within me. That is all for now. I very much want to speak with you tête-à-tête”—face to face.

I answered that in our student years he had shown little interest in my biography. He had simply fallen in love with me and asked no questions. Only now was he surprised to learn that I had attended music school, played the violin, and then stopped around fifth grade and left the school. He found all this fascinating.

In those years Janym had been absorbed in himself. When people told him that no matter how I tried to explain, he would never have me as his lawful wife, his hands fell helplessly. But he could not command his heart. In the end he decided to marry the woman who had pursued him.

I knew nothing about the life he had lived and did not think it my place to inquire. I always believed people must make their own choices and that no one has the right to interfere in their lives. I had given him no hope. Long before, I understood that I would not be with him. I subdued my heart and never counted on Janym. Even so, it must have hurt to hear that he had married.

Had he not studied beside me—had he been somewhere far away or at another institution—it would not have been so painful. But at the time there was nothing but talk all around us, and there was no escape. That was fate. I, and only I, had to suffer it: the judgments and whispering. Imagine him—a married man in love with a girl he could never have. But what of the girl? That is the question. It was very difficult. The atmosphere among our classmates was tense for me, while he seemed not to care at all.

What did he write next over the internet? Perhaps it is worth telling:

“I am crushed. It turns out that I never knew you at all, and still do not. Love blinds everything—the eyes, the ears, and the mind. There is no point asking your forgiveness for all the pain I caused, because such forgiveness cannot be requested. I shall beg God to forgive me.”

In response, I wrote a poem called **Forgive Me**.

You said, “Forgive me,” and I forgave.
You said, “I am guilty,” and I forgave.
You said, “I will pray until my death,”
But never said—for what?

You and I—we are both to blame.
We did not want to celebrate our love.
The game of love came harshly to us;
Life taught us a bitter lesson.

With time I became strong.
You did not recognize me then,
For without knowing what you did,
You molded me—cruel and made of ice.

We thought that time had healed it,
That everything had been forgotten.
Now there is nothing left to prove,
For tomorrow we may be gone.

Yet it is beyond our power
To halt the raging element.

He went on: “I want to tell you so much, but cannot yet. Be sure to write about your children and grandchildren.”

I had forgotten everything long before. Life had left no time for such memories, much less for him. I did not want to fall back into the past; all of it was over. I had become proud and hard and wanted to tease him, to feel that I now held the advantage. I wanted to answer with a touch of arrogance.

I wrote that I had wanted to block him but could not, and that everything I had said was sincere. Throughout life I had remained principled. Perhaps it was

genetic. I had never been unfaithful to my husband and remained the same person to this day. I had never betrayed anyone—not him, not my friends. Now I ask myself whether that was good or bad.

Yet nearly everyone betrayed me except my children and Murad. Until the end of his life, Murad stayed beside me and almost worshiped me, while I treated him harshly, indifferently, and coldly. And for that, I told Janym, you were to blame.

“You left with your family,” I wrote, “and now I do not know who you are, what you have become, or what is happening to you. Forgive me if I have said something wrong. We should not stir up the past. Close Odnoklassniki.” But no matter how I tried, I could not bring it to an end.

At that moment I was still able to reason more or less calmly. I found the strength to part with him before it was too late. But he moved first. Janym wrote, “Hello,” and again sent Yuri Voronov's poem, “They Were Killing Love—Killing It with Four Hands.” The poem was deeply moving; a chill ran over my skin and all my feelings rose again.

He asked whether I agreed with the poem. I answered that I did. As I read the lines, tears streamed from my eyes. He had touched my soul and heart. We truly had been killing our love. Then I understood that his love for me had not faded in the least; it had flared even more strongly. The tears kept falling. I could no longer stop them. I was frightened for myself. Perhaps he felt all of this from far away; I only hoped his family would not notice.

I wrote that during the years of our separation—almost fifty years since I had married—I had seen him in my dreams for three years in succession, especially at the beginning. I did not consciously think about him; that was impossible. A new life had begun, everything was different, and my thoughts belonged entirely to my family.

The dreams were vivid. Janym and I would hold hands and run and run across a field full of flowers, never looking back. And that, it seems, is what we had done through life—run without looking behind us. We had children, then grandchildren; there was endless bustle and no pause.

In later years I saw Janym in dreams less often, but I still saw him. Perhaps that meant he too remembered me. Whenever I dreamed of him at night, I remained in a good mood the whole next day, with the image of my Janym constantly in my mind. No one knew anything about it. In those years I had no time even to think of anything else; I was consumed by life's cares and hardships.

In my dreams I saw Janym from a distance. He was far from me. I even dreamed that he had fallen ill—and it turned out that he had suffered two

heart attacks. Yet I had not known whether he was alive or had long since died. My feelings had grown very dull.

Once in town I met a former classmate. She told me about a reunion and said that one of our classmates had visited Janym at his home. He was terribly homesick there.

After we found each other on OK, he questioned me constantly about my feelings for him, my family, my life, my children, and Murad. Yet he almost never spoke about himself; as the saying goes, he was very slippery. I sensed that he had no wish to discuss his family life. He was wholly absorbed in mine. He expressed pride only in his younger daughter and his grandson.

I also asked him to recall episodes from our student years and from the life we had shared, because they interested me. He sensed some kind of trap. In the end I realized that he was “a man in a case,” like the character in Anton Chekhov's story. Then I expressed my feelings briefly in verse:

Do not be silent—do not be silent.
Speak to me, speak.
Can it truly be impossible,
Impossible even now?

Together we will fly away;
Perhaps there we shall speak.
Can even there it not be done?
So little time remains.

The cry of my soul will echo,
And a voice replies: “Be silent.”
I was afraid then to say
That I loved you, while you
Were satisfied with yourself.

You and I are only vapor,
Or spirit, or a cry;
We were wind upon the steppe,

We were accused of sins of love;
You were the spider, I the fly.

I remember the amber beads
That you once gave to me,
And the bouquet of dark-red chrysanthemums.

You say that it was all make-believe.
Let it have been make-believe—
I truly loved you.

You are far from me,
And I am far from you.
We no longer have the right to dream.

The world is cruel, indifferent, without a soul—
Perhaps only toward the two of us.

Why do I blame only you?
Because there was pain inside my chest.

Indeed, within my soul I blamed him alone, while I could not answer my own question: why? Janym understood that his hopes were futile. Cultured, educated, and brought up according to Jewish traditions though he was, he knew I would never belong to him. His desires would remain unanswered, while all of us are living people with human needs. Therefore he needed a wife. As he himself put it, “Needs come before everything else.”

Then I wrote to him:

Do not be offended with me
Because I write in verse.
You understand no other way.

I knew that you had loved me,
And I loved you even more.
Only our souls thirst to meet
So that we may remain together forever.

My Janym, whom I now also called Babay, asked me to send him photographs of our classmates, but only Sonya had them. Sonya and I met very rarely, usually when we happened to collect our pensions at the same place. In earlier days there had been a live queue and no bank cards. We must have lived in the same district if we received our pensions at the same office.

We were not close friends and did not invite each other home. In the past she had told me everything about the class reunions. She found all of it fascinating, while I scarcely listened. I simply did not care. Even now I wonder why I was so cold-blooded.

Once Sonya told me about Babay. As I have already mentioned, one of our classmates had visited him. At one of the last reunions, when hardly anyone remained and very few people attended, I finally came. Then Sonya hinted that at an earlier gathering Babay had taken her hand. Naturally, he denied it and said nothing of the kind had ever happened.

Sonya or the others could have found me and invited me to the reunions, but I came to understand that I was unnecessary there; too much was at stake. In any case, during those years and those that followed, I could not have gone anywhere because of my husband's jealousy.

I wrote to Babay about him and Sonya and, out of jealousy, added several other girls as well. Like a true prosecutor, he immediately took the bull by the horns. I was the bull. He began interrogating me.

With some arrogance and my usual hard character, I pressured him in return: I knew nothing about him anymore—who he was or what he had become—because so many years had passed. Then he began answering my questions while posing his own. Whenever he demanded an answer, I generally gave one, because I knew him. Yet there were some questions I could not answer. He realized that he had caught me like a cobra catching a mouse.

Given his stern nature, I sometimes thought he might simply tell me to go to hell. I was prepared to ask Jennet to close Odnoklassniki so that no further disagreements would arise between us, but he refused and began asking new questions.

At some point I had written to him about a spider and a fly—I do not remember exactly—and sent pictures. He replied:

“Salam. I suppose the spider is meant to be me. Perhaps you are right. But I never wove intrigues, least of all against you. And if you meet Sonya, tell her that she has a very rich imagination and should not mistake what she wishes for what actually happened. I respect and value all of them as former classmates, nothing more. Forgive me, but I have more questions for you.”

Then he wrote them down.

“First: were you legally married to Murad or not?”

What did he think marriage was—a child's game? Did he regard me as a frivolous fool? The question was utterly unexpected. How could he think such a thing of me? Had I ever behaved lightly? I began wondering where I might have made a mistake. If he had acted carelessly, I had not. Murad's parents had given costly gifts for me. None of it had been a game. On what grounds could he even entertain such a thought? This is how men think of women.

I never understood why he asked, and did not ask him why. Perhaps he had doubts. Then he should have said directly what sort of woman he believed me to be. The thought behind it was simple: if I could not belong to him, then I should have belonged to no one. Male pride.

His second question was:

“Do you remember our one and only meeting together at the Red Cross?”

The Red Cross was the Pirogov Clinic, where Babay was undergoing examinations. It was around the time our eldest son had first been arrested as a minor, something I believe I have already described. I told Murad that a former classmate of mine worked in the Prosecutor General's Office and suggested we go to ask him what we should do. Our son was in trouble. Murad set aside everything else. Although he knew about my past, at that moment his son mattered more than his pride.

I honestly do not remember who summoned Janym from the ward. I was in shock over my son's detention. I think a nurse called him, not I. Murad and I stood waiting in the lobby. Janym did not notice that Murad was standing off to one side. When he saw me, he began approaching with obvious joy. I felt awkward and made my face stern. Fortunately, Janym had his back to Murad, who noticed nothing.

Then Murad came over and the two men greeted one another. We discussed our situation. As we were leaving, I saw Janym to my right. I must have cast him a very strict look, because Murad watched every change in my expression and was intensely jealous. A husband is still a husband.

Babay's next question was:

“What consequences did that meeting have for you?”

None, really. We did not discuss it at home. As usual, Murad got drunk so that he would not have to think. Afterward he no longer cared about anything; he had flown into the clouds.

His fourth question was:

“Did I manage to help your son in any way?”

The prosecutor of our district had been a good acquaintance since childhood, from the same village and the same school class as my brother. Since my son had been caught for the first time and was still a minor, the prosecutor could have released him from custody. He did not. He wanted money. He only asked whether we had told anyone else. We said no, and that was all. Apparently someone mentioned Janym to him, but he did not react, and the case went to court.

Once it was before the court, a certain sum in dollars was requested from us through the lawyer. Had we not paid, they would have sent Mergen to a juvenile colony. Instead, he received a suspended sentence, one not involving imprisonment.

I wrote to Janym that answering his questions at my age was both painful and wounding, but that I would try. I would begin with the easiest for me, his sixth question.

As I have said many times, “Janym” means “my soul.” After university I was assigned as a trainee to the State Agro-Industrial Committee and worked as a lawyer at MashElektroSnabSbyt. I remained there for about a year. I married and only afterward resigned. Then I joined the Ministry of Justice, in the department for systematizing legislation and preparing draft laws, where I worked for roughly ten years. Later I was assigned as a trainee judge.

Everything had been arranged for me: a flat, Party membership, and so on. But because I was pregnant with my youngest son and because of other circumstances connected with my husband's jealousy, I transferred to the bar.

I worked as an advocate for a long time and defended especially dangerous criminals. No one paid for such assigned cases. With my belly already enormous, I went into the detention center—the prison. It was unbearable there. The smell! Whenever I came home, all my clothing reeked.

In one case, prisoners rammed the solid prison wall with a tractor and escaped. Naturally, they were caught; some were killed while attempting to flee.

Later I returned to the State Agro-Industrial Committee and handled arbitration matters. There I received a four-room flat. For a time I decided to rest at home, perhaps two years. After that I became head of the legal department at the Ministry of Transport and traveled on official assignments. My final workplace was the Water Management Design Institute, from which I retired. In short, I worked nearly all my life and did not sit at home. At the same time I cared for the children, the house, and the entire household.

In recent years I traveled in summer to my daughter in Turkish Cyprus. She too had never sat idle. She worked, then went to England, afterward moved to Cyprus, married there, and remained with her two sons.

Former classmates told me that Babay held public consultations on Wednesdays at the Ministry of Justice on behalf of the prosecutor's office. We had gathered for a sad reason: the death of Bahar, my closest university friend. We all went to the memorial meal, and that was where Babay and I met.

People often sent me greetings from him as well. Wherever I went, someone asked me about him. Of course this angered me, because that past life had ended like a nightmare. I already had my own family and a life unrelated to him. God forbid my husband should have heard about those greetings. He would not necessarily have done anything, but women know how men can destroy us psychologically through jealousy.

It seemed that Janym was my other half after all—an investigator for especially important cases. And so he truly was. Sherlock Holmes.

Then came his fifth question:

“Why did you remain silent all those years and never let me hear from you?”

An interesting question. I do not remember exactly what I answered. I wrote through OK and sent the reply by way of my daughter.

If I had not made myself known, yet he had wanted so much to see me, then why had he not found me while we still lived in the same city? What had stopped him? He was a coward, a careerist, and an egoist. Why had Ashir managed to find me? Ashir came to visit, told me about his life—though it did not interest me at all—and asked about mine. Why could Janym not do the same?

He could not because he was a slippery coward. Yet perhaps I was not entirely fair. He was regarded as an intelligent man and had thought through everything from every angle. A slippery coward nonetheless. Besides, as far as I knew, he was not always in the city; he worked in the provinces. He thought like a man and I like a woman, so we differed in many ways. Men and women are different. He had no time: he was immersed in work and family life. And because he had Jewish blood on his mother's side, his conscience did not permit such exploits. How cunning we women can be. Enough of that.

I myself had to go to his workplace two or three times. I knew where he worked; he did not know where I was employed. When he discovered it by chance, he telephoned my office and asked me to come see him. Nothing improper occurred between us. We spoke only about family and work.

My answers to his questions were disorderly, not sequential. Let me return to his first: had I truly been married to Murad?

I still did not understand the question. Where, then, had my children come from—children who looked so much like Murad? An educated investigator asking such a thing. He simply wanted to humiliate me. Male pride. I answered briefly then, but now I shall answer more fully.

Yes, there was a large wedding. Afterward I ended up in Khitrovka. “Khitrovka” was our figurative name for the district. People who had moved from other velayats for various reasons lived there. They were the most feudal of Turkmen, preserving an old feudal way of life. Murad's family had come from an aul. Their ancestors had once been bais—wealthy people—and many had therefore been arrested and exiled to Siberia, while their families were driven from their native places. Naturally, I could not fit into that household.

If I were to describe everything in detail, my nerves would not endure it. I finally told them all where to go, and Murad and I moved into my parents' home. How bold I was. I did not even stop to ask whether Murad wished to come with me or whether my parents agreed to receive us. Once I had decided, that was how it would be.

All my relatives came to love Murad. A year later, after finding a flat, the three of us moved out—Murad, I, and our daughter Jennet. During his lifetime Murad did much good for my relatives. With God's help he graduated from the Polytechnic Institute. He worked and also sang at weddings.

Murad and I lived together for forty years. He died of a heart attack at sixty-two. During the final years of his life I stayed at my daughter's home because she traveled abroad for work, and I raised my grandson Dovlet. Every day after work Murad came to eat and have his clothes washed, then went away; he did not stay overnight. We no longer had intimate relations. Perhaps he too had simply grown old.

Dovlet was born in 1997, under the sign of Scorpio. He grew up an exceptionally obedient boy.

When Babay and I parted after university, he caught up with me as I walked home and said that I would never be happy with my husband. I listened and said nothing. How had he dared to tell me such a thing?

As a person Murad was kind and good, like Winnie-the-Pooh. But the entire household—the children and Murad himself—rested on my shoulders. That was my cross: washing, ironing, bringing home food, helping with lessons, taking children to kindergarten, cooking lunch, cleaning the house, and still hurrying to work without being late. It is frightening even to imagine.

Murad loved me deeply and was terribly jealous. That, of course, was not normal. He was jealous even of the television—of programs I watched and singers I listened to. He would come home at night and open the wardrobe to see whether a lover was hiding inside. Alcohol caused all of it; there was nothing I could do. I lived inside an enchanted circle.

On top of everything, Mergen was arrested three or four times and learned nothing from it. I alone ran to all those institutions, never empty-handed. Each time he demanded more and more from us and wrote pitiful letters. I could not ignore him; he was still my son. Murad was lost in drinking bouts and had no concern for us.

Babay—my Janym—affectionately called me “dayzashka,” little auntie. He too must have had difficulties and once said we had no reason to complain about life. But he certainly had never endured what I had, and I would never have wished it on him. He was disciplined, respectable, and demanding. He was even awarded an order as an honored lawyer. His son worked and retired at forty-five. His life and mine were worlds apart.

I did not envy him, but long ago he had foretold an unhappy life for me without him. No life could have been more unhappy than mine. I would not wish it on anyone.

Despite everything, I carried myself proudly and showed nothing at work. I labored my whole life and finally retired. When life becomes hard, not one person remains beside you. Everyone scatters, even your closest kin. That is a fact.

It is painful for me now to remember all this. My mind was in a fog, yet I held on as best I could: work, endless problems, no escape. I understood only that Babay considered me cruel and judged me, while toward Murad he expressed endless sympathy. Male solidarity. Poor Murad.

By asking his questions, Babay had already drawn his own conclusions. He wrote that he eagerly awaited the continuation.

“There are no traps in my questions,” he said, “and there cannot be any. I sincerely want to know about you and your life. I feel that I share responsibility for the way your fate unfolded. If we continue communicating, I shall try, as far as possible, to explain my actions. I wish well-being to you, your children, and your grandchildren. You have done magnificently. I wish peace for your soul. Do not judge me too harshly. Babay.”

I replied:

“You are so proper. You acknowledge your mistakes. Wise and warm-hearted. You write like Onegin addressing Tatiana: ‘I loved you; perhaps love has not yet entirely faded in my soul.’”

I was overwhelmed with emotion. What was I supposed to answer? “My soul, I thank you most humbly for the letter you have deigned to write me”? Was that how I should respond? Thinking is one thing; writing is another. So I wrote instead:

“I am emotional. Normally I am calm and quiet, but now I could not restrain myself. You were always cruel to me. You can kill me with a single word. You never have to search for words; you write correctly and beautifully, leaving nothing to criticize. But only I know what lies behind them.

“You know exactly how to deal with me and wound me in the heart, because I am a naïve fool. Yes, my soul will find peace only in the next world—and yours too, incidentally. There we shall settle everything. You will speak with my soul, if not with me.”

We continued trying to clarify things. I believe I also wrote:

“You come to me in dreams, which means you always remember me. I do not come to you. Does that mean everything I say and write to you is untrue? I am simply shocked.”

I was entirely ruled by emotion. I loved him, yet he doubted it and was jealous of my deceased husband, driving me beyond endurance. With my whole soul I wanted to prove how deeply I had loved him. In that sense he had been right: after so many years, I had begun proving how much I had loved him and still did.

In truth, I was gradually growing attached to him again, and the old feelings were returning more strongly each day. I was now free, and if this was love, it did not die. He had a family and remained cautious. I, a proud egoist, thought only of myself, although he wrote that I was the person dearest to him and that I refused to understand anything.

It was true. Neither before marriage nor afterward had I betrayed Babay. I had always been alone, while he had a wife and then a child. I hardly saw him, only occasionally in class. I demanded absolutely nothing. Everything remained silent—silently inside me. Later I blamed him constantly and said everything was his fault.

Naturally, he had drawn sensible conclusions. He understood that I would never be his and decided to arrange his own life. There was no escaping that. Only in fairy tales and legends do people wait until the end of their days.

I wrote:

“I shall tell you why I always treated you in two contradictory ways. I simply loved you and was jealous of your family. You did not belong to me. My life has always been a closed circle. Other people made every decision for me. But none of this matters now, and it does not excuse me.”

Why did I treat Babay in exactly that way, continually accusing him? I still had no complete answer, and probably never would. It was our life, our past and present. Everything was a theory of relativity, like Einstein's: at each period of life we had thought differently.

Babay wrote:

“Apparently you are very agitated at the moment. Forgive me for causing that. I await your questions both eagerly and anxiously.”

Yes, I was emotional. That meant my feelings for him had not cooled. Perhaps too many words had remained unsaid. I wrote:

“I shall calm down. So you are taking revenge on me. Murad has been dead for ten years. He should have drunk less. Did Murad die because of me too? He lived for his own pleasure. When I married him, it turned out he was already drinking, and so on. You too had planned everything—what I would say and how. How brave you have become. Tell me. For now I shall not reveal your secrets. You once showed me photographs from Bayram-Ali. Your new fiancée was in them.”

We were still untangling our student life, jealousy, and disagreements. Babay became angry at me and my answers. He had been accustomed to seeing me quiet, meek, and silent.

I wrote about a photograph he had shown me in our student years:

“‘Your new fiancée’—that was how you yourself described her. Is that not true? You are so white and fluffy, so innocent. You damned Babay.”

His answer came:

“It is very difficult for me to understand you. You are like a volcano. Calm down. What happened has happened; nothing can be corrected or brought back. I remember nothing about photographs from Bayram-Ali—truly. It was far too long ago.

“How could you imagine that I was taking revenge on you? For what? It is you who are punishing me and humiliating me with unfounded suspicions. To me you were and remain a saint. Do not distort that image. If our communication is unpleasant for you, let us end it. The decision is yours. For now I have nothing more to say; anything may be misunderstood. I am glad that you were and remain part of my life.”

Yes, it was written beautifully and correctly. In plain language: do not struggle; sit still. He had put me firmly in my place. Of course, he was a man and I a woman.

My answer was:

“All right, I have calmed down. You are right. I understand my mistakes. The truth always hurts the eyes, and that is why I could not answer you.”

Apparently I did not reply for a long time. I had been stunned. I no longer remember clearly. Then I continued:

“Forgive me. I shall not insult you again. You are the most precious person I ever had and still have in my life. I know you expected this reaction. Better late than never. Yet you still slipped cunningly away from an answer. *Dum spiro, spero*—while I breathe, I hope. I hope you will come to Ashgabat and we shall meet.

“Evidently we had to discuss this subject. You said you would pray to me, yet once again you are teaching me a lesson. I am the eternal pupil and you are my teacher, as always. I love you. Bye.”

Babay was delighted that I had become so obedient. He wrote:

“Hello, my unpredictable one. I still remember ‘While I breathe, I hope.’ But, to my shame, I have forgotten the second Latin expression. Apparently I listened poorly to Zarifa Ismailovna, our Latin teacher. Strange and unbelievable as it may seem to you, everything best in my youth was also connected with you. Of course I understood what I meant to you. I knew of your feelings for me, but I was made to understand that we could not be together.”

There his Jewish nature revealed itself. He had been dying for me, loving me, even doubting that I loved him—and now he grew bold. “I knew what I meant to you, but I was made to understand...” Oh, go to hell. Naturally feelings arose when he kept pestering an innocent girl whose whole life lay ahead. He had intruded where he did not belong. At first I did not even regard him as my kind of man. I had another taste, another type. Yet yes, I began falling in love.

Then he wrote: “Who would give an Akhal beauty to a Jew, and one of average height at that?”

“That predetermined everything I did afterward. Surely you understand?”

Yes, I understood. But I had needed nothing from him, while I certainly did not understand him. He should have stepped out of my path. Instead, he attached himself to me and would not let go.

Now I wrote:

“I am serious now. But the truth is that I am growing more and more attached to you. My love is rising again, especially because I am alone and Murad is gone. I can no longer stop.

“Yes, I understand; we both understand. I could not betray my parents, and it was good that you did not insist. Both of us acted sensibly. Later, however, I lived in a straitjacket—I mean my husband. He kept me under control. It was a sacrifice I made for my parents' sake. I do not regret it, nor should you, because you already had a family, although you had once been ready for anything. Everything in life passes, and all of this has passed too. I love you, Janym.”

I sent him lines by a poet who used the pen name Aquarius:

You are one page in the book of my life,
And cannot be removed from my fate.
Love and the impulses of madness—
Perhaps we still have something to lose.

That novel was written by our hearts,
For you and I alone were its heroes.
Reading at last to the final page,
We learned that we parted as strangers.

No, it was not in vain that I remembered;
Warmth left its imprint upon my soul,
A greeting preserved as a memory
From the love that once had been.

Then another poem, by Sofia Kim:

You and I have not met for years.

How are you there; how is your life?
We live beneath the same wide sky,
Yet the road between us is long.

Your early sun is already rising;
Outside my window it is dark.
I always worry about you—
Are you ill there without me?

Everything is fine with me, as you see;
Life continues without you.
I know you hate me
Because I did not bring you back.

Only know that I have forgiven you
And no longer ache because of you.
Only today did my soul release you—
For how many years I blamed you.

Forgive me; I could do no other,
Knowing that you kissed someone else.
Perhaps you were destined for her,
While someone else needed me.

That was my answer, and apparently it was very sad.

I love listening to music—the songs of French singers, Aznavour and Iglesias, and also Lyudmila Zykina and Nadezhda Kadysheva. Their voices calm my soul. With that music I fly far away across seas and oceans and meet the person I love.

Then I wrote:

“Babay, I loved you very deeply and still love you.”

Every letter to him was meant to be the last. Each time I said farewell. He began writing less and less; perhaps he had already said everything that needed to be said. Perhaps his family had begun to suspect something. Yet I went on writing. Apart from him, I had no one.

He wrote:

“How can you not understand that my house is full of my own people? You are the person dearest to me. Please understand.”

To this day I still write and send photographs. He answers rarely. I too once decided to stop, but I felt him so strongly beside me and dreamed of him.

One day I discovered fortune-tellers on TikTok. They claimed to tell me everything about him. We women are all curious, and everything they said seemed accurate—until one told me that he had already died and was waiting for me in the next world. I abandoned TikTok at once. I nearly died of shock myself. I began calling him directly, although he had forbidden me to telephone his number. Text messages were permitted, but calls were not. When he answered, I calmed down. He said he would call back; perhaps he too had missed me terribly. And he did call.

Let me continue. My heart still beats. I told him I would occasionally let him know about myself and send short videos. He was interested in everything about me and watched them with pleasure and curiosity. After so many years apart, he wanted to see what I had become, how I had changed, what my children looked like, where I had traveled, and how my family life had unfolded.

He sent nothing about himself—not even a live image. There were only old photographs with his family and children. His life after retirement had become very dull, yet he simply did not want anyone to know about him. He began concealing things even from me. I had become his entertainment program.

In fact he had plenty to do: chop firewood, light the stove, heat the bathhouse, and probably cook meals, I suspected. He was extremely hardworking. I knew that from our student days picking cotton. I gathered perhaps fifteen to seventeen kilograms; he, if I remember correctly, gathered nearly one hundred.

Of course he had grown old. He was approaching seventy-nine. His children helped him chop wood, especially his son, who had worked in the security services and had already retired, since such officers retired at forty-five.

I wrote further:

My heart knocks and beats,
Runs onward and onward,
But there stands a wall,
And it is made of ice.

I must finally stop
And forget everything forever.
Yes, I agree—there is no other way.
Your dayzashka.

I ought to have been ashamed, yet I continued:

“Janym, forgive me for everything. Perhaps you were not the only one who caused pain; perhaps I hurt you too. Now we do not know when we shall meet. In life we truly became like the heroes of a Shakespearean drama. The Lord played a cruel joke on us—or perhaps the opposite.

“The holiest thing is Love, and you and I experienced it. Now we need not fear death. We should thank God. And now each of us must return home. Forgive me.”

Many times I prepared to say farewell to Janym. This is the last time, I thought; truly the last. At first he would not agree. Then, over the course of our correspondence, I became still more attached to him. He entered my soul anew, just as in our student years, and I could not tear myself away.

Like a blogger, I sent short videos featuring myself. Through them he learned about my present life. My aging did not disturb him. I was seventy-six, while I saw him only in old pictures on OK with his family. He was younger there, a colonel, an honored lawyer, and a pensioner of special status.

I assumed he had saved money. His mother was Jewish, so he too was Jewish. I say this because he had money and was not poor. Jews always have money; they are intelligent, unlike us. And there I was with my love, intruding into another family. It was unacceptable in Jewish tradition and even more so in ours.

I repeatedly tried to end the correspondence, but some power above us would not allow it.

Janym wrote:

“You are the best, most beautiful, dearest dayzashka in the world. In my memory you will always remain that ironic girl with the hard character and slightly prickly nature. Thank you for having been part of my life.”

Then he continued:

“Good afternoon, my dear. Today I had a dream. There was an enormous hall filled with strangers. Suddenly, among the crowd, I saw you. You wore a long burgundy dress with golden ornamentation. You looked at me with a sad, slightly ironic smile, and tears stood in your eyes. It struck me like an electric shock. I looked at you and wept too. I do not want to return anywhere. I pray to the Almighty to let me see you at least in dreams.”

I answered:

“Your dream is close to reality. You have relaxed too much, and further communication with you frightens me a little. Better return home. I have become not merely bold, but brazen. I picture Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*.”

Janym replied:

“Let everything be as you wish.”

I had become more self-confident, while he remained as cultured and well-mannered as ever. I wrote:

“Hello, Babay. You were right that I am somewhat hard—perhaps even cruel. Life made me that way. You killed two birds with one stone. I am still afraid of offending you and monitor every word carefully.

“Jennet says you and I behave like adolescents. She says she does not read our letters because they give her a headache and she does not want to puzzle over them. She finished a Turkmen school and has no desire to understand other people's logic.”

It turned out that my foreign passport had expired. My daughter Jennet said, “Mama, do not sit there. Go, run around, and obtain a passport.” God willing, if I managed to go to Cyprus, I would be able to communicate with him tête-à-tête, face to face.

At the same time I was dealing with a housing problem. They said Tekinka was to be demolished. Jennet's flat might disappear, yet she could not come here. Her family and small child were there, and returning required a heap of documents. She might not be allowed to leave again.

I sat remembering our student life. Tears ran and ran without my noticing, and I could not stop them. I was afraid the people at home would see. My eyes were red, as if I had been sneezing. Outwardly everything seemed normal; Janym and I had clarified matters.

I wrote:

“You saw me very accurately in your dream. I am always crying—tears and more tears. There are many relatives around me, and I really own a burgundy dress with gold thread. Again I am becoming selfish.

“You know how much I love you. I do not want you to leave either. I told you that you would see me in a dream. My son Meylis says, ‘Mama, what are you constantly reading and writing there? Let me see.’ I drive him away, though he loves me very much.

“So, ‘Wait for me and I shall return—only wait very faithfully.’ Goodbye. Your dayzashka.”

When Jennet forwarded my letters to Babay, she once confused messages intended personally for her and sent them to him. She did not even read Russian carefully and had no wish to enter into the details. Her mentality was different. Her character was half her father's and half mine: her kindness and nobility came from him, while her decisiveness and courage perhaps came from me. I was not always decisive, but I feared very little.

I sent Jennet some emojis. Thinking they were meant for Babay, she forwarded them. He was delighted and assumed they were for him. I wrote that the emojis had not been intended for him. In reply he sent flowers with wishes for a good morning.

“And whom are the flowers for,” I asked, “me or Jennet?” Jennet laughed; she had caused the whole confusion by forwarding the wrong emojis. I warned him, “Watch yourself, Babay.”

He answered:

“This is a new bouquet for our liaison officer. I can imagine how tired she is of our correspondence. The previous emoji was for you alone—the one and only. I lay all the flowers in the world at your feet.”

I wrote:

“Babay, thank you for the bunch of flowers. Jennet liked the expression ‘liaison officer’ so much that she repeated it and laughed all day. She says it sounds like the role of a matchmaker. I told her she is more like a telephone operator.”

Babay again said I was cruel.

The next day I planned to go to the migration service. The main thing for both of us now was health. The two of them had taken offense at me. Naturally, I later apologized. “I love you,” I told Babay. Lately he had become easily offended and often called me cruel. I did not notice that trait in myself. Perhaps he was simply too gentle and kind, although I had never noticed those qualities because he had always corrected me.

I wrote:

“In a month I can collect my passport, on 22 June 2022. You too pursued me for a long time. You made me angry, took my bag, rummaged through it, pulled out my things, and threw my coat wherever you pleased. Our class had attractive, even beautiful girls. They all wanted your attention and were gentler in character. Why did you need a stubborn, hard woman like me? When I reach Cyprus I shall settle accounts with you, so do not relax.”

Babay became more and more offended. Once, when he telephoned, he said, “You used to be so quiet.” I replied that still waters run deep. “Yes,” he answered, “that is true.”

I sent photographs of Jennet, her family, and her two sons. Babay wrote:

“What we need most is always what is no longer there.”

Expressions like that infuriated me. So, if I had been beside him, he would not have needed me so much. It was another way to hurt me, strike the most sensitive place, and put me back in my place like a little dog—in short, to tame a shrew.

He wrote:

“If I understand correctly, the people beside Jennet are her family. What wonderful people—may no evil eye touch them. Yes, I believe in signs too. You passed on an excellent inheritance. How could it be otherwise? Good breeding is visible at once. I hope the character of your children and grandchildren is much gentler than yours. May God grant them health and prosperity.”

Again he made me angry. I began doubting myself. What had I done to him? Babay could not accept that the quiet, obedient love he remembered had become a defiant lioness. He remained an old-fashioned old gentleman, proper and intelligent.

I was not young either, but my soul was young and I was an optimist, always active. I wrote:

“Janym, my soul. You once said to me: ‘You are water and I am fire; you can extinguish me.’ But sometimes even water cannot put out a fire—it makes the flame burn more fiercely. Your actions sometimes caused me pain in exactly that way.”

Now he also knew that I had once played the violin. I sent lines from a song:

Weep, my violin, weep.

See, the sun no longer smiles.

Tell him of my love;

Tell him how my heart beats.

Tell him—perhaps

Love will return once more.

“Babay, forgive me. I am such a fool. Do not leave me; I have become so accustomed to you. If you go, I shall die.”

I told Jennet that if communication had become too difficult, she should tell him in her own name that I wanted to remove him. Jennet wrote:

“Dear Babay, Mama wishes to delete you. This evening I shall carry out her request.”

Babay answered:

“Do not make hasty decisions. It is not so simple.”

In our student years, on a photograph of me, Babay had written in my name: “To my beloved little Babay, from me. Remember me and love me as I love you. My dear, my only one. Your Gulya.” Below he had added, “Lousy little beast.”

During our correspondence he finally explained why. Apparently I had once insulted him and his friend by calling them beasts. I was surprised, because I did not remember the incident. Perhaps they had driven me to it. He promised to show me the photograph of himself with his friend, with my supposed inscription on the back, but I never saw it.

I wrote:

“You see? I shall remind you how you tormented me. And now you pretend to be white, fluffy, and innocent.”

I sent him a video in which I said something—I no longer remember precisely. Later I sent many more. He sent me absolutely nothing: no photograph, no video, nothing.

Babay wrote:

“Hello, my soul. I do not know which of us won.”

I sent a video saying:

“Yes, you won in life and I lost.”

He replied:

“I do not know which of us won—you or I. Most likely, both of us lost. Only time won and defeated us. Nothing can now be repaired. Jennet is right: the train has already departed.

“Let us stop finishing each other off with old grievances and live instead with bright memories, even if they belong to the past—and at least occasionally see one another in our dreams. I want very, very much to communicate with you.

“You may not believe me, but I feel you distinctly. I feel your pain, resentment, and regret over what never came to pass. You can, of course, punish me by ending our communication. But believe me, it will not make you feel any better either.

“I cannot tell you the essential words that, I think, you are waiting to hear. Such words must be spoken face to face. Your Babay. Jennet, forgive us, and thank you.”

“Thank you for your patience and for the time you have spent on two unhappy old people.”

Sometimes I become irrational and ignore ordinary human feeling. I say and do what I want without thinking or sympathizing. I begin to hate Babay whenever he writes in bureaucratic language or, as people say, hides behind official phrases.

Yes, perhaps ending the correspondence would not make life easier for me either, because I was becoming deeply attached to him. But he said he could not utter the words he believed I expected. I had never expected “I love you” from him, and had never said those words myself. For years he had done all the dreaming; now I too could not simply say “I love you.” I would rather tell him to go to hell. That was how harsh I could be, even while loving him.

I wrote:

“Janym, you are right. Everything you wrote truly happened. During the first three years of my marriage, I saw you constantly in my dreams. The most vivid dream was of us holding hands and running through a field filled with flowers. We ran and ran without looking back.

“We did not look back, and children and grandchildren appeared. Only now, by some miracle, have we turned around. And it turns out the feelings never vanished. They are exactly as they were.

“Jennet has finally heard us admit our love for one another at this unfortunate age, when we are already crumbling like granulated sugar. She has calmed down; before that, she suspected our minds were no longer sound. She is a nurse and was exhausted day and night by pandemic vaccinations. Now many places are canceling them, and the nurses' work is becoming easier.”

Yes, Babay was right. Throughout my life only one man had ever truly attracted me: him. How shall I put it? I love only once. Perhaps no such old-fashioned people remain today.

Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto. I am human, and nothing human is alien to me. Like an old rat—I was born in the Year of the Rat according to the Japanese calendar—I hoped not to fall into a mousetrap, although no one waited there for me except Babay.

I do not know what came over me. I was wrong. That letter angered him and, dear God, he sent me away for a long time.

At last he wrote:

“Salam. Now I shall say everything I have wanted to say for a long time. I am sure you have heard and understood. I cannot write to you often. I am not the only person using this device, which seriously limits my opportunities. My home is full of people dear to me. Understand me. You are the person dearest to me. And do not hurt me again.”

So, it seemed, he was sacrificing much for me—his family relations and the time of his loved ones—while I had grown insolent. From that day he began restricting our correspondence. I had insulted him continually.

Yes, I understood my mistake, but that was simply how I was. Old grievances remained, and in my heart I could not forgive them. Again and again I stepped on the same rake. Then I wrote Babay a farewell letter:

“Janym, perhaps I could not leave without saying goodbye. Forgive me for all the pain I caused. If I, with my hard character, could have controlled these feelings, I would long ago have extinguished, erased, or killed them for the sake of those dear to you and me. But it proved impossible. We do not control feelings; they control us.

“I have long wanted to return home, yet neither of us managed to do so. I know your health is weak, as is mine. Neither you nor I has the right to continue communicating if it harms our families and loved ones.

“Everything I wrote before remains true, except for the pain I caused you. Forgive me for blocking you; I must do it so that neither of us nourishes illusions. If you wish to send a text message, you know both Jennet's number and mine.

“This year I shall not manage to travel to my daughter in Cyprus. God willing, perhaps next summer. That is all. It is time. I have understood everything. Farewell. Forget me if you can. That is all.”

Overwhelmed by feeling, I apparently could not stop or regain control. What an old fool. Yet the soul remains young; it does not age even when the body does. And I had too much free time. My husband was gone; perhaps I wanted love again. No, no—never. I loved no one.

Babay answered:

“Salam, dear dayzashka. You are my sweet sorrow. Why are you as prickly as a yandak thorn? May both hearts in your breast beat in unison and in a major key—calmly and joyfully.

“How much time remains for us? Tear from your memories every regret for the happiness that never came to pass. Yes, everything could have been different. But it happened as it did, and apparently the Almighty wished it so; we may not contradict Him.

“We are both guilty, though I and the circumstances are more to blame. The Russian singer Masha Rasputina has a song with the words: ‘Do not whisper to me of your love; I cannot love you more. If I die, it will not be of jealousy; I shall die of tenderness.’ Listen to it—it is about us.

“We both possess what matters most: our children and grandchildren. May the Almighty be merciful to them. Appear in my dream; I want to see you, at least there. Your troublesome Babay. Goodbye until next time.

“Hello, Jennet. Have we not tired you yet? Forgive us if anything is wrong. These are memories of our youth, and we cannot free ourselves from them. Do not repeat our mistakes. I wish you success in everything you undertake. How is the story progressing?”

Then I wrote again:

“I think I should not bother you by writing when everything has already been said. From your love, from your fire, upon your breast, at the dawn of day...

“I am shocked myself. After so many years those feelings should have died and cooled, yet they have flared even more fiercely. It frightens me. Can such a thing truly happen? It feels as though we parted only yesterday and I am now pouring out my grievances.

“Perhaps my heart was like a bird. There were so many suitors, men who wanted to cover me in gold and place the whole world at my feet. Some even wept because of my character; I would not let them come near me. Then I saw that I could not remain an old maid forever and decided to marry. I simply closed my eyes to everything and did it.

“If I have the opportunity, I shall tell you about the incident you later mentioned. I was like a bird in a cage. Do not take every harsh thing I said too seriously. I thought our virtual meeting was merely a journey through time, like a time machine or a wheel of time. It was not. The past—especially everything left unsaid—had not released us. It held me by the throat.

“They say there is no statute of limitations for such things.

“So it is with me. Tears are constantly in my eyes. I feel you and I love you. You are a man—*erkek* in Turkmen—so perhaps it is easier for you to endure. Clap your hands and everything is forgotten. Why remember the past?

“We have no past. There is only the present and a radiant future, as under communism. If writing is so difficult for you, then do not write. I shall understand and draw my conclusions. I am no longer the girl you knew.

“What wounded me so deeply that tears never leave my eyes? After university I had been prepared to part with you without regret. You had already tormented my nerves enough. I did not shed a single tear then, because I had always been proud. I told even Bahar almost nothing about you.

“She proposed her brother as a husband for me, and later a handsome, university-educated relative. Some young men even brought friends into our classroom to introduce them to me. It was all a nightmare. Perhaps these are the tears I should have shed when we parted forever from student life, when we were a girl and a young man.

“You had foretold that my family life would fail. Perhaps you do not even remember. You washed your hands of everything and walked away with a clear conscience. In your words and inside you, I felt nothing manly—only a weak person, a coward. I listened quietly, remained silent, and walked away without looking back.

“My intuition had never failed me. God grant that I was mistaken then. But I was not. You never gave me a voice, never gave me the right to speak, although on my side everything had already been decided. I had resolved never to marry you for my parents' sake. I was a sacrifice, and I do not regret it.

“But you had already reached conclusions for both of us without asking me anything. A self-confident feudal lord. You were offended only when someone touched your pride. You considered nearly everyone incapable of thought and illiterate.”

Murad, my husband, despite his noble appearance and kindness, kept demanding that I confess whether I loved Janym. One day I could bear no more and said yes. And then what? After that he finally stopped tormenting me. None of it matters now.

What would have happened if we could begin again? I think that under the circumstances of that time, everything would have unfolded in exactly the same way. The Almighty willed it.

At the same time Murad was terrified of losing me. There could be no question of his allowing that. He would never have let me go. Yet he constantly feared that I would leave. I had no possibility of doing so. That is another story of my life.

I was only seeking an answer: why, then, did my soul still feel so heavy? Both of us had agreed to separate.

Do you imagine that I was throwing myself around Babay's neck? No. He was the one who cunningly refused to release me; that was his nature. Love cannot be caught by the tail. Love is an immense ocean in which a person may drown, with no one able to save her.

P.S. Sometimes the telephone writes its own version. Before you know it, it replaces “horizontal” with “vertical.” I do not even reread what I have written. Do you remember “poste restante”? You once wrote me a letter that way. Never mind.

All of this is material for a story. Perhaps someone will find it interesting. Do not answer my letters; write nothing. That will be better. Otherwise your wife may suddenly see a message, hit you over the head, and you might drop dead. I am joking.

Jennet and I congratulated Babay on his birthday through OK. All our correspondence took place through that site, and because I had no account, Jennet passed everything from me to him and from him to me. She did not read the messages; they did not interest her. She had her own family, her own concerns, and a different mentality.

It turned out that we had made a mistake. The birthday information was written unclearly in Turkish. We waited for words of thanks, but he did not understand us and thought we were joking. Jennet took offense and deleted OK. He did not explain himself. He too was principled, and the situation conveniently played into his hands. He was cautious, and one could understand him.

Had Murad been alive, I would never have permitted myself such behavior. I do not know whether OK was fully deleted or not. Clearly Jennet and I did not understand the site. I thought: thank God. We had been confusing one another and achieving nothing.

Jennet herself was surprised. A considerable amount of time passed, and I reconciled myself to the loss.

One day I was in a shopping center. I love wandering through shops and markets; I am a shopaholic, though not obsessed with clothes. Suddenly my telephone rang. I hear poorly when people are around me, and the number was unknown. I answered—and it was Babay. At last he could not endure the silence.

Finally I heard his voice, a voice dear and close to me, the voice of a distant love. Feeling overwhelmed both of us.

“How are you? How are you? You said I was your one and only.”

“Do you not feel it?” he replied.

I told him that I did. The word “love,” we agreed, need not be spoken; it is felt.

For a long time my feelings for him had filled my chest to overflowing. Here was old age, and here was love consuming all my energy. Once again, as in my student years, I fell asleep with his name and awoke with it. I did not know how to stop the stream—the molten current of a volcano. I quarreled with him, insulted him, broke contact, but nothing worked. Pandora's box had been opened completely.

In my simplicity I told Babay everything he asked. Asking and interrogating was his profession, after all: Sherlock Holmes, chief investigator for especially important cases, and a reserve colonel besides. Having listened, he concluded that I was hard.

He himself was a true man in a case. He told me nothing about himself; on the contrary, he concealed more and more. He was slippery and evaded questions. I sent text messages; he answered rarely and dryly. I assumed he had financial difficulties, though at the same time he received an enhanced personal pension. Even with my small pension, I could afford both messages and telephone calls.

Whenever Babay sensed that I was moving away, he reacted immediately. One could say he kept me on a short leash. At once he found words such as “dear” and “beloved.”

Once I telephoned him. He was deeply afraid that his family might suspect something and strictly forbade me to call again. I took offense and decided that this was the end; I had to stop.

The next day he sent a text message:

“My beloved. I love you.”

He had never spoken or written those words before, and now there they were. Naturally, I melted at once. It turned out I needed very little, and he knew it.

My element by horoscope is fire; his is earth. He loves order, discipline, and control—he is a Virgo. I am fire, an adventurer, a Sagittarius, and perhaps even Ophiuchus. I must never let what belongs to me escape; I must shoot straight at the target.

Yet in life we looked in opposite directions. He looked west and I east. As in Pakhmutova's song:

I left for the scorching steppes;

You went scouting in the taiga.

Summer was approaching, and I was going to Cyprus. I hoped I would see him over the internet there.

By the end of April I was already in Cyprus. On arrival I became occupied with documents—there were many. On earlier visits there had not been such bureaucracy. Air routes had reopened after the great pandemic, a virus that struck the entire world. Even though the pandemic had ended, piles of papers were still required, including a certificate showing the number of injections received.

When I first came to Cyprus, I had felt calm: how wonderful, I thought—abroad, and my daughter had married successfully. But matters were not so perfect. In the marriage documents I found a multitude of procedural errors. I was a lawyer and had to check everything; my daughter had not even looked.

I forced my son-in-law to hire an advocate and have the marriage certificate validated anew, with the errors corrected, because they had been made deliberately. The notary and my son-in-law escaped responsibility. There, it seemed, one hand washed the other and both washed the face, as the Latin proverb says. Never mind.

If I were to write about my daughter's life, no number of pages would be enough. That is another story, and a very interesting one. In any event, Cyprus meant sun, sea, and exotic surroundings.

By early May it was already possible to swim. Once or twice a week we drove in my daughter's car to the sea, which was warm. Because she worked, we could go only on Saturdays or Sundays. We took many photographs. Naturally I sent all the best photographs and videos to Babay. He, in turn, visited OK and viewed them.

During the five months I remained in Cyprus, he did not write a single word and never appeared live. Something must have been happening. He was an investigator and could have found a way to contact me if he wished.

I wrote poems to him—many of them over the whole period of our communication. I loved him with all my heart, and that was why I wrote. Had we not met on OK, my love would have remained hidden deep, deep inside my heart: a love I had thrown into the ocean, which only he—my Janym—could retrieve.

Although I was angry with him, he was not my main purpose in Cyprus. My daughter was. I wanted to remain with her as long as possible and talk to my heart's content. I did not know whether I would see her again. Babay could be dealt with later.

At least my daughter liked her life, family, and children. Her elder son studied and worked, then graduated from university and became an architect. Her younger son was a mischievous boy; we did not yet know what would become of him. I hoped for the best.

Did I remember Murad? No; I tried not to. Only negative feelings rose in me—may God forgive me—although he had done very much good for me. In earlier years I regularly visited my husband's grave and recited Ya-Sin, the heart of the Qur'an. Recently I had stopped going. But everything can be corrected; all rests in God's will.

I remained in Cyprus from 28 April to 15 September 2023.

My poem **The Blue Sea**:

How long I waited for this blue sea,

How long I waited for its salty scent.

I waited for you too, but you did not come.

Why?

Then a wave embraced me.
“Do not be afraid, my dear,
For the wave is I,
And no one else.”

I look into the blue sky,
Searching for you, my love.
You are afraid to appear.
My soul, I am waiting.

Parting

The sea is weeping; darkness has fallen.
Waves strike against the shore.
Where did you and I lose our love?
The wind was fierce that day.

The wind said, “I can do anything.
Follow me, my dear.
I shall give you riches,
I shall give you gold.”

But I remained beside the sea.
I shall wait for you forever,
And when you return,
I shall ask only one question:
“Why did you fall in love with me?”

I am a woman of reasonable judgment, but also profoundly sentimental. Where my love is concerned, I cannot close the matter firmly. I leave room for feeling.

I returned home filled with emotion after being with my children, grandchildren, and family. As for Babay, nothing had been resolved. Then one fine day he telephoned as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The moment I heard his voice I softened. His voice draws me with extraordinary power. Such are women—we forgive everything.

This continued for a long time. We also saw one another through IMO. Perhaps it will continue still. For now, it does.

I am now preparing a collection of my poems. I wrote them as best I could. All came from the emotions of my love for Babay.

I shall soon be seventy-seven, and Babay will be seventy-nine. God grant that Babay and I do not quarrel.

My Beloved Flower

You left me when I loved you;
You left me when you loved me.
Yet you did not forget me,
And I did not forget you.
My chest was heavy—
Longing, endless longing.

You searched for me and waited,
You came to me in dreams.
I loved you, but did not seek you.
You accused me: I was to blame.
I accuse you: you were to blame.

What existed between us
Belonged to us alone;
It shall remain our secret.
He became a snowy Babay,
And I an iron flower.
So little time remains.

My beloved Yusuf,
I have not forgotten you.
As before, fate did not unite us.
My iron heart, hearing your voice,
Suddenly melted and would not cool.

You trembled when you saw me.
Nothing can be changed.
Nostalgia overtook you.
So little time remains.
There will be no meeting,
Only dreams.

We failed to value one another.

March 2022

My Tears

Do not humiliate me,
Do not humiliate me.
Do not hurt me,
Do not hurt me.

Do you want to trample my pride,
To see my tears?
Here are my tears,
But you cannot see them.

You do not hear my sobs.
You see only a proud flower
That you wish to break.

Beloved Yusuf,
You will not forget me
While you are alive
And I am alive.

My dear, forgive me.
Hold me—
Hold me very tightly.

2020

Babay, this is dedicated to you—from your thorny rose.

Farewell, Youth

Such a time has come:
There are three others,
And with me we are four.

They say we shall soon fly to Mars
And build a house upon the Moon.
There are worlds unknown to us;
There are antibodies.

Everything is interesting,
But no longer to me.
I want to return home,
To go back there—

Where my childhood and youth passed,
Where Mama and Papa lived,
Where I loved them,
Where my brothers and sisters were,
And my friends as well.
That wonderful time is gone.

My youth has passed,
The youth in which I loved so deeply.
Roses blossomed there,
Daisies and poppies.
I flew through life;
Everything was beautiful.
The sun shone,
The sea roared.

Then other concerns appeared:
Children, family, and country.
The time came to reflect,
And suddenly my beloved Janym appeared.

Virtually—but the passion had not gone.
It rose again and swept through like a typhoon.
It was frightening, bitter, and painful.
Nothing can be returned;
Pandora's box had only been opened.

2022

Farewell, Farewell

The time has come to part from you,
Yet I do not want to let you go.
Let everyone know you were always mine;
Your heart belongs to me.

Once you took possession of my heart,
And I took possession of yours.
Nothing can tear our hearts apart
Until the end of our days.

Our love was given by God.
I am so afraid of losing you,
Of learning nothing more about you.
My heart will tell me how you are.

I am your little hedgehog,
And you are my Babay.

2022

Farewell

Do not be offended
That I write in verse;
You will not otherwise understand
What I am trying to say.

My soul will come to you unnoticed
And lie quietly upon your breast.
Back then I loved that young man.
Could that young man truly have been you?

I look at the photograph
And speak to him—to that boy:
Hello, my dear,
My beloved.
Where have all our dreams gone?

That is all.
I am losing you again.
You are so elusive,
And time is short.

I knew you had fallen madly in love with me,
And later I loved you even more.

Janym.

March–April 2022

Do Not Be Silent

Do not be silent,
Do not be silent.
Speak,
Speak.

Can it truly be impossible?
Together we shall fly away.
The cry of my soul will echo,
And a voice replies: “Be silent.”

I was afraid then to say
That I loved you,
While you were satisfied with yourself.

You and I were only vapor or spirit,
Or a cry,
Or wind in the steppe.
They accused us,
But we endured.

You were the spider,
And I the fly.
I remember the amber beads
You gave me,
And the bouquet of chrysanthemums.

You want to say it was all pretend.
Yet then I loved you with my soul.
You are far from me,
And I am far from you.

Dreaming does no harm.

Let us dream together.

2022

Sadness

For two days I wept
Because of your hurtful words.
I boarded a bus
And put on my glasses.

Tears began rolling from my eyes.
You are right, as always,
And I am guilty.

I wondered what was happening with him.
I opened the tarot cards,
Although it was dangerous.

There he lay with his beloved dog,
Dragging her close and kissing her.
How could he?

2022

It Has Grown Cold

I adore you,
I adore you with love.
Winter is coming soon,
And I have grown cold.

You have no warmth for me,
But I shall warm myself without you.

I run and run toward you.
Now we are together,
Soaring beneath the heavens again,
My beloved—and I am with you.

Again and again I dream,
And again I freeze.
“Do not hurry, my dear;
We shall surely meet.”

Love me and I shall grow warm,
Forget that I have been freezing.
I shall think only of your warmth
And of kisses from your lips.

Words are so difficult to say;
They can wound hearts.

I am afraid to say them,
My desired one,
My only one.

I have already melted without you.
It is hard to return to you.
My heart is tearing,
But reason is silent.
We are together now, my dear.

2022

How I Long to Embrace You

Before me lies a galaxy,
And I search and search for my planet.
But why—why
Can I not find you?

I want to come to your planet,
To be alone there with you.
I searched for you for so long;
My love never passed away.

When we are no longer in this world,

We shall be far away together.
My love, they will not forget us;
Our poems will remain.

How I long to embrace you.
My soul and yours once sang as one.
Although we did not remain together,
Our music still sounded.

Its melody continues even now,
In dreams like a sweet night.
Yusuf dreams of a flower,
Beautiful as a rose upon the bush.

2022

The Past

You think the past is only past,
And that we should not grieve for it.
But the past is the present;
My soul loves and remains silent.

You want me to be silent,
But we have no present.
How can the past be changed?
The past is love.

Love is beautiful;
Poems are written about it.
Stop me, my dear,
And if you can—forgive me.

I have lost the image of your face;
By now your hair must be gray.
You hide yourself from me,
Yet I love you all the same.

Perhaps you own a guitar.
Play me a song about a train
Where people fall in love and marry.
You and I were not so fortunate:
The train departed,
And we arrived too late.

2022

Go Away

Go away, go away,
My beloved Yusuf.
It is long past time
For me to return.

Do not tear my heart apart, my dear.
I shall forget you as before.
When we met again, we suffered,
And love was no longer the same.

“What was it like?” you ask.
“Love like any love—
Or perhaps it had become another.”

Your obedient Gul was gone;
Your Gul had become difficult,
Bold and cruel.
Forgive me, my dear,
For the pain I caused.

“I loved that girl,
Loved her madly,
But she became another.
Where are you, my Gul?
Where are you, my flower?”

Only the sound of wind carries the words,
Still whispering:
“I love you, my dear.”

May the Almighty Lord forgive us both;
Once we loved one another.

2022

I Do Not Want You

I do not want, do not want
To remember you.
I shall have to forget you.
The time has come to decide.

“What must be decided, my dear?
Answer me.”

I do not know myself;
How difficult it is to answer.
Go away, go out of my life,
And never appear again.

How hard it is to endure
Parting from you, my boy.
You remain in my memory,
The one I loved so deeply.

But now everything has changed.

Time changed us both.
Suddenly we are old and gray.
Yet I so long to return
And ask you once again: “Why?”

We have no answer.
We are both to blame.
We must end this mad love
And return to our lives.

I weep and weep.
How could fate
Have been so cruel to us?

2022

I Do Not Know Whether I Shall Return

I am afraid to look into your eyes;
I drown in them.
But I must not,
So I leave without saying goodbye.

Forgive me,
Forgive me,
Forgive me.

I do not know whether I shall return.
My love, I am guilty.

I was cruel to you
Without admitting it.
I thought I was right in everything.
Loving you, I was dying.

There is little time.
It is time to say farewell.
Why are there tears,
Always tears?

I was an untamed hurricane,
Refusing to submit to fate.
Loving you, I was dying.
Now it is time to part.

10–20 December 2022

Can We Truly Not Return?

I drown myself in wine,
Wanting to forget everything.
My soul aches and cries;
There is no more time to love.

Can we truly not return
And continue our love?
No—the blue heavens await us,

Gardens, flowers, and peacocks.

Forgive me for everything that happened,
For everything I did not say.
Now I must return,
My soul, my love.

Yes, it has passed;
Everything has passed
And must not return.
So that you will not suffer,
We must fly away like birds.

Why did no tears fall then?
It was not I, but pride beside me.
Afterward I waited and waited,
But all was useless;
My soul had died that very day.

10–20 December 2022

Full Stop

I lie on the sofa,
A white cat beside me,
Caressing and loving me.

Winter has come,
Yet our home is warm,

While a block of ice lies upon my heart.
No one wants to know why it is there;
No one cares about me.

Perhaps the ice will never melt,
Because warmth will never return.

A large, heavy full stop has been placed.
I do not need you.
Thank you for everything.

Be well, do not fall ill, my dear,
Though you cannot master yourself.
Do you want to play tricks with me?
You will not succeed.

I am prickly and terribly hard;
You are weak and a little coward.
Could I truly once have loved
A man like you?

22 December 2022

They Are Leaving

They are leaving, leaving, leaving—
The final words of love.
The last notes are sounding.
Wait, wait for me.

How shall we say farewell?
With a kiss or an embrace?
Neither is possible.
Only our song will continue.

“What will it sing about, my dear?”
About the life we lived,
Our mad love,
And the aching longing without one another.

Then let us fly away together;
We shall not need to say goodbye.
“How can we do that, my dear?”
Our souls will do it for us.

January 2022

Feeling

I feel you so strongly.
Sometimes you want to teach me a lesson.
Then I cry quietly
And think: enough.

I must leave you.
I go, but not for long;
I return again.
You hold me,
And I am powerless.

You refuse to tell me
How deeply you love me.
You want to make me angry,
To teach me a lesson.

And you succeed.
I lie there emptied of strength,
Thinking I shall take revenge.
You are far from me,
And so it goes without end.

6 January 2023

I Shall Leave

I shall leave your life forever,
Quietly, unnoticed,
Just as I arrived.
Only you and I will be sad;
The others will sigh with relief
And scarcely notice.

Only our hearts will beat as before.
Sometimes we shall see each other in dreams,
Thinking and thinking,
Dreaming and dreaming,
While our hearts still beat softly.

The meeting destined for us
Was given as a gift from God.
Thank you for the love
And for the pain
We caused and endured together.

A tear falls and falls
As I remember you.
You weep quietly
So no one will notice.

You are hurting;
Such, then, is our fate.
You are my happiness
And my sorrow,
And I am your sweet sorrow.

January 2023

I Am Only ...Five

I am a mad fool who wants to fly.
Soon I shall be ...five,
Yet I shall still wait.

I shall search for the bench
Where you and I once dreamed,
And remember our student love.

Let the sun shine;
Let the years never end.
You are here with me;
You were always beside me.

Here you come flying,
Bringing chrysanthemums.
Thank you, life.
Forgive me,
Forgive me.

I want so much to cry and scream;
I cannot hold back the tears.
I am a poisoned arrow,
But I do not want to wound anyone.

You always loved playing hide-and-seek.
Now God has hidden you from us.
Yet you still manage
To reach me even from there.

At times you drive me mad.
You know—the old frog still croaks.
Lord, give me an iron heart.
I want to remember you,
Remember you.

20 October 2023

After a reunion of classmates.

I No Longer Care

I calmed down and understood
That I must become calm.
Now I no longer care;
Everything has already passed.

Little time remains.
I do not want to remember anyone,
Not even you.
I think I can succeed.

Perhaps you are waiting;
Perhaps you are not—
That is what I think.

What lies in your heart, my dear?
I have begun to doubt you.

I know that only I am in your heart.
Then what prevents you from admitting it?

When I heard that dear voice
After a thousand years,
I thought you were mine alone,
And nothing else was possible.

It turns out I was mistaken.
You tried to persuade me otherwise.
Forgive me; I have no right to this.
We stopped belonging to each other long ago.

I shall wait for you
As long as necessary.
We shall be together all the same.
Forgive me—you fear losing me,
And therefore must be strict with me.

30 March 2023

These are merely my emotions.

Why Kiss?

This is our song,
A melody of sadness.
Our hearts are beating;
A waltz is playing.

Let us dance together in farewell,
But let us not kiss.
Why kiss when everything is clear?
It is clear you love me, my dear.

Love is beautiful
When nothing is understood,
When it is always spring.

I shall wake you very early
And kiss you.
“Where are you, my dear?
Where are you, beloved?
Do not go, my flower—wait.”

Only the scent of wormwood
Remained with you.

5 November 2023

Be Happy

You said, “Be happy.”
But with whom shall I be loved?
I never stopped loving you;
You wounded my heart.

I want to forget you,
But cannot.
Again the waltz melody plays,
And again, again I cry.

Enjoying the sweetness
Of the love that once was,
My mind is in a fog.
Now you torment me.

I know with whom you are.
Be silent; do not tell me
That I was cruel.
Everything is forgotten now—
Or perhaps it is not.

November 2023

The Sea and Tears

The sea weeps; darkness has fallen.
Waves strike the shore.
Where did you and I lose our love?
The wind was fierce that day.

The wind told me:
“I can do anything.
Follow me, my dear;
I shall give you wealth,
I shall give you gold.”

And I followed without looking back.
I shall wait for you forever,
And when you return,
I shall ask only one question:
“Why did you fall in love with me?”

5 November 2023

My Soul

I have become lost in time.
They will think I am insane.
Everything is simple when I close my eyes:

I see you in the cosmos,
And fly away to you,
Into our misty country.

My soul aches and moans.
What has happened to you?
You do not want to say
That you love me.

You have long been mine,
My one and only.
You are afraid to show yourself to others.
I am mad; yes, I love you.

I am in love with your fairy-tale image.
You are far, far from me.
I pray that you will be forgiven
For your sins and for everything
That you and I have done.

6 November 2023

Barnabas

I hear bells ringing
And sacred singing.
Where is it—where?
The Apostle Barnabas rests here;
An angel circles above us.

He wants to tell us something,
But we cannot hear him.
“Wait, wait. Thank you
For visiting me.
May God grant you health and happiness.”

I read and thank God
For giving us life.
For all my relatives and loved ones
I ask Him to grant health
And lengthen their days.

When I recite the prayer Ya-Sin,
I feel an angel beside me,
Sitting, listening, silent.
May Allah forgive us,
Give us health and strength.

18 November 2023

Forgive Me

You said, “Forgive me,” and I forgave.
You said, “I am guilty,” and I forgave.
You said, “I shall pray until my death,”
But never said—for what?

You and I—we are both to blame.
We did not want to celebrate our love.
The game of love dealt with us cruelly;
Life taught us its lesson almost in jest.

With time I became strong.
You did not recognize me then,
For without knowing what you did,
You molded me—cruel and made of ice.

We thought that time had healed it,
That everything had been forgotten.
Now there is nothing left to prove,
For tomorrow we may be gone.

Yet it is beyond our power
To halt the raging element.

10 December 2023

I Want to Be a Bird

I want to become a bird now
And fly to you,
Look at you and circle overhead,
So that you will see me,
Then return.

Afterward you will long
To see me once again.
But seeing me is now impossible;
Tears will appear in your eyes—
Tears of a love gone by.

Janym, my dear,
My heart.
I want you so deeply;
I want only to feel
Your beloved gaze.

Then I shall return and weep.
For now, only in my thoughts
Will I seek your eyes
And dream.

10 December 2023

A Dream

You came to my home in a dream.
We kissed,
And afterward you did not leave,
While I was afraid of retribution.

We were happy together.
It seemed strange to me
That you went nowhere,
And everyone remained silent.

When I awoke, you were gone.
You had been thinking of me—I know.
I feel your love,
And you feel mine, beloved.

I shall preserve our love in verse.
It will never fade.
We shall fly away there together
And remain together forever.

25 January 2024

Rain Is Drizzling

The street is gray;
Rain drizzles.
My heart feels wretched,
And love is slowly leaving.

I have no strength
To love as before.
One cannot love forever.
My heart waits—
I cannot, I cannot.

How can I say, “Stop”?
It is eternal;
There is no way.

Now I need peace.
I am so terribly tired.
Where is peace?
It will never be here—
Only above the clouds,
In heaven.

Soon I shall awaken.
How are you?
Do you not want to say anything?
I waited so long for your words.
Now, perhaps, I no longer care.

18 February 2024

Do Not Go

Do not go, my dear.
If you leave, I shall die.
You seem to remain beside me,
But have become a ghost.

I want to hear words of love,
Yet you say nothing;
You remain silent.
But that is not the main thing.
The main thing is that you are alive.

Wake up, wake up.
You have turned to wood.
How can I rouse you?
I shall fly to you,
Embrace you, awaken you,
And you will open your eyes.

Then you will tell me:
“I loved you more than life,
My flower.
But now I cannot say it aloud.
I am a ghost, my dear.
Forgive me.”

14 February 2024

Years, Years

The years pass,
The years keep passing.
You have not invited me to meet
For a very long time.

I stopped waiting for you.
I walk and walk alone,
And only your heart
Beats and speaks to me:

“I cannot, my dear.
I am imprisoned within myself.
I understand
How little time remains.”

Life is only beginning;
Everything is so beautiful.
I wait for you,
But you have no time for me,
Although you loved me,
My dear boy.

I am Gul,
And you are Yusuf.

6 April 2024

Our Time

A little scarf flutters in the wind;
My soul flies toward you.
I know you wait for me, my love—
Or perhaps you stopped long ago.

You speak to me silently
So that no one will hear.
You touch me tenderly,
And I melt in your arms.

Stop—stand still, our time.
Let me delight in him.
Afterward, let whatever happens happen.
My love, forgive me,
Forgive me.

28 April 2024

Paradise

And now I am in paradise—
How beautiful it is.
Flowers everywhere,
And I am flying.

The sky is blue beneath me;
Water in the river flows like diamonds.
What more could I need?
Only you are missing.

I am waiting for you, Babay.
The Lord will forgive us.

Then I awoke.
My pillow was beside me,
And there sat Babay,
My beloved sweet bun.

2 July 2024

The Meeting

We parted while still loving,
Then traveled a long road without one another.
Suddenly, by chance, we met again.

I want to embrace and kiss you,
To love you as before.
But we cannot;
The distance is too great.

Those dear to us,
The hearts we cherish,
Do not let either of us go.

I wait and wait,
Tears in my eyes,
Waiting for a simple call.

A wave, a sea wave, embraces me
And says, “Do not cry.”
It wipes away my tears and whispers,
“I love you more than life.”

Tears keep falling.
Nothing can be restored.
Only prayer remains.

2 August 2024

Heat and Cold

Love is an ache in the heart.
It is endless;
Nothing can erase it.
It can only be muffled for a time.

Run, run—
It is time for class.
Dear boy—
How sad that you were not mine.
How deeply I loved you,
Yet we were not destined to be together.

Homeland and heat
Were replaced by cold.
The hot wind calls:
“Come.”

The amber beads are gone.
There is Jennet, with black eyes;
There is Boris, with gray eyes.

The old First Park remains,
Leninsky Avenue,
And that same bench.
Let us walk there
And look into each other's eyes;
There will be tears.

28 August 2024

A Dream

I flew to you,
And you awoke.
You saw me and began kissing me.
“Janym,” you said,
And began to cry.

“This cannot happen, my dear.”

I must fly away;
It is time.
Do you want to say something?

“Do not go.
I love you.”

I too would like to remain.
There is little time;
Only one second is given.
Say what you want.

I want to fly with you
To the blue sea
And remain there together.

We fly and fly.
Soon we shall awaken.

1 September 2024

You Forgot Me

An unfinished house without a roof.
I lost an incomprehensible love;
Everything became tangled in my mind.
I turned into a wanderer from a film.

The days pass and pass;
My love waits,
Yet I want nothing.
I do not understand what happened to me.
May God forgive this wayward man.

Gray mountains look at me in wonder.
On a green hill I see a red flower.

You forgot me, my dear.
When will you come?

12 September 2024

A Dream

Do you remember that song,
That sorrowful song
You used to hum each time?

Near dawn you sang me its melody,
And once again disappeared somewhere.

12 December 2024

I Am Waiting for You

I have waited for you so long,
Searching for you with my eyes.
I search the steppe,
I search the desert;
I want to see you.

You forbid me to call you,
And you cannot call me.
I love you, my dear boy.
Our summer heat has long passed.

Cold arrived suddenly.
Have our feelings frozen too?
How can they be melted?
I do not know.
My hot tear wanders on.

You are silent, silent—speak.
I know you wait for me,
For my laughter,
For the fragrant mountain flowers
We once gathered together.

23 November 2024

Time

The time has come,
An incomprehensible time
When we must part.

He understood he must not remain;
I understood there was emptiness inside me.
In my soul I made the decision:
I must leave him.

All of it with tears in my eyes.
I blamed him
When I myself was guilty.

Why is fate so cruel?
At that time it could not be turned.
He called me an “iron flower,”
But I was only a reed beside the river.

28 December 2024

Tell Me

Tell me—are you waiting for my forgiveness?
I forgave you long ago.
It is still too early to leave; wait.
Tell me that you fell madly in love with me.

I would have remained with you,
But you did not call me to go with you.

16 May 2025

Do You Remember That Song?

Do you remember that song,
That sorrowful song
You used to hum each time?

Near dawn you sang me its melody,
Then disappeared somewhere again.
You said you would soon return,
But for now you could not come.

I listened to you and fell asleep again.
I shall light a candle;
My angel has awakened.
But that angel is not you.

December 2024

The Voice

I became lost in this world,
Incomprehensible to everyone.
I searched for a road
And could not find it.
Then I heard a voice from somewhere.

That voice was dear and familiar:
“I am with you.
I shall teach you how to live.
I shall remove your iron chains.
Now you are free.
Fly.”

December 2024

You Are Here

You are here and not here.
Where are you?
There you stand;
A forest is beside you.
All around is white, fluffy snow.
I look and cannot believe it.

“How are you, my dear?”
“How is your health, my beloved?”
There are bitter tears in your eyes and mine.
Through the glass we look at one another.

Here is my son; he resembles me.
My daughter resembles her father.
You and I once dreamed together;
Our feelings never disappeared.

You said to me:
“My dear,
My beauty,
My own beloved.”

I said:
“I love you, Janym.”
My love,
I shall wait a little longer.

28 December 2024

Do Not Wait

I know that you are alive,
And I need nothing more.
I shall pray for you.

Do not wait for me,
And I shall not wait for you.
This is how we shall live forever.

Perhaps I shall not know what happens to you,
And you will not know what happens to me.
I shall see you only in dreams.
Will you see me too, my love?

“Do not wait, do not wait,”
A voice tells me.
I do not wait—
I only remember
How you walk toward me
And look at me.

One beloved glance—
And I need nothing more.

22 February 2025

A Vase of Flowers

The asphalt gleams beneath a gray sky;
Rain drizzles.
Nearby stands a vase of flowers,
Filled with tears—
Tears of years gone by.

An iron heart remains silent.
I want to walk alone,
To walk and walk,
And there—the heavens.

It is a little cool.
I shall go and lie down;
My heart aches.
I remember you.
Come—let us dance.

10 March 2025

Wind

A dusty wind flies into my face,
Disheveling me until my sight grows dim.
I turn my back to it;
It disappears and suddenly grows still.

You searched for me a long time
And grieved.
You did not forget me, Janym;
You forgave me.

A red poppy is a beautiful flower;
Its petals are like clouds.

You are a ghost;
You will vanish now.
I shall wait for you
Again and again,
Until I grow tired.

3 May 2025

Supplication

In a dream I see Satan;
He pulls me toward himself.
I am frightened
And run quickly out of the pit.

Everything there burns and burns.
They pull and pull at me.
I cry, “Help me.”

“Lord, I have come to You.
Receive me.
Forgive me,
Forgive me.

“I shall pray
For my sins.
How terrifying it is to remember;
It cannot be forgotten.”

You did not take me away;
You forgave and forgave.
My love departed;
My friends went into the damp earth.
Now I understand everything;
It is not yet too late.

I remained alone.
Mama is with me.

12 May 2025

You Are Silent

I am leaving;
My soul hurts,
And there is no medicine.
Then my soul flies to you,
But you remain silent,
Offering no explanation.

For the last time I want to ask:
“Do you agree that we should part?”

You are still silent,
Not knowing how to answer.
I burned;
The heat consumed me.
You grew cold;
There is frost in my soul.

Love does not want to die,
But you and I will force it to.
It has grown tired of waiting;
You have become cold.
For me, perhaps,
It will be better this way.

Only my burning tears
Will melt your heart.

But you will no longer see them.
Then what will you say to me?
Are you hiding your love from me?
Now it no longer matters...

10 June 2025

All Has Passed

~~You regret that you left me,~~
You went away without saying goodbye,
And I could promise you nothing.
You loved me in silence;
I loved you too.
Only the wildflowers knew.

Long ago, it all passed.
Remembering you,
My heart suddenly tightened.
What did I do back then?
There are constant tears in my eyes.

My dear, even without you
I while away my days—my freezing days.
How can I tell you how much remains?
There are tears in my eyes.
Nothing can be brought back.

You and I sit together, watching a film;
We dance together—it is already evening.
A waltz. I must go home.
Wake up! Wipe away your tears!

4 August 2025

Only Me

Me, me, me—everywhere, only me;
Awake, it is me, and in your dreams, me.
There is nowhere for you to hide from me—

Only me and me.

Only you are mine—you, you, and you;
In my dreams it is you, and beside me, you,
Only you and you.
Well then, catch me if you can!

Here is a beautiful scarlet flower.
Pluck her! Do you want to pluck her?
And then you will cast her away. Do you not pity her?
Tell me—what do you want?

I cannot understand you,
For this flower comes from the tsar's garden.
You cannot reach her;
You can only breathe in her magical fragrance.

You are a prisoner in my life.
I am the Firebird who scorched you,
Who flew away and carried off your heart,
Leaving my own heart in exchange.

13 September 2025

S. A. Adaeva

Music Is Playing

On the table is a little bouquet
I bought for myself—
A violet flower
That I once loved.

I read the cards, wondering how you are now;
I wait for your call.
A melody pours into my soul.
Now I shall rise and go to the window.
Time flies—ah, how I long to live!
Perhaps this musical game goes on?

You love me—love only me.
A waltz is playing; you and I whirl together,
Flying, flying beneath enchanted music.

Where are you now? I wonder and think.
You said, “Do not call; I shall call you myself.”

S. A. Adaeva

18 October 2025

Translator's note: The source page is handwritten. The line “Perhaps this musical game goes on?” is partially unclear in the original.

— End of the complete translation —